

# Christian History & BIOGRAPHY

Issue 87 Summer 2005 \$5.00

INDIA

## A Faith of Many Colors

- Pandita Ramabai, India's Christian advocate for women
- Evangelical missionaries before William Carey
- The church's struggle with caste and more . . .



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## Interesting facts about Christianity in India



The tsunami that wreaked so much destruction across the Indian Ocean on Sunday morning, December 26, 2004, devastated towns along India's shore that boast significant Christian populations. In the picture at left, a Catholic shrine (called the "Our Lady of the East" as it attracts millions of pilgrims each year) overlooks overturned storefronts in the town of Vailankanni. Vailankanni is located on the shores of the southeastern Indian state of Tamil Nadu (see page 25 for a map of India), which is a bastion of both Catholic and Protestant Christianity. Catholic missionaries planted churches there in the 16th century and Pietists in the 18th (for more on these efforts, see pp. 19, 21, and 31). Tamil Nadu is the supposed burial place of the Apostle Thomas and is associated with a number of famous Christian leaders including the Irish missionary Amy Carmichael, the historian Stephen Neill, the theologian Lesslie Newbigin, and the popular apologist Ravi Zacharias.



Indian Christians claim an ancient heritage. According to tradition, the Apostle Thomas landed on the Malabar coast of southwest India in A.D. 52. He healed the sick and demon-possessed, converted people from various castes, and finally died in Mylapore (now within the huge city of Madras, recently renamed Chennai) at the hands of hostile Brahmins. The second-century *Acts of Thomas* relates that Thomas encountered an Indian official named Abban in Jerusalem, who invited him to come to India to build a palace for King Gundaphorus. Thomas agreed to go with Abban, and the king eventually became a believer.

Indian Christians still make pilgrimages to shrines that remember Thomas.

Valiankanni, India in the wake of the tsunami: Margreet Singh, St. Thomas shrine: Joshua Newton

As an act of penance on Good Friday, Catholic nuns (see bottom left) carry wooden crosses nearly 2,000 feet up a hill in Malayattoor, Kerala, where Thomas is believed to have spent many days in prayer. The traditional burial site atop St. Thomas Mount in Madras has been venerated for at least 1500 years.

Palm-leaf, copperplate, and stone inscriptions all attest to a living church in India dating to the first few centuries of the Christian era. Today, at least six communities in India still claim the link to Thomas—the Orthodox Syrian Church, the Independent Syrian Church of Malabar, the Mar Thoma Church, the Malankara Catholic Church, the Church of the East, and the St. Thomas Evangelical Church.

## The Most Christian Part of India

Given that many of our articles focus on southern India, this issue could give the impression that Christianity thrives only in the south. But that's not true—American Baptist and Welsh Presbyterian missionaries brought Christianity to northeast India in the late 19th century, and today Christians actually have a proportionately stronger presence in some of India's northeastern states than they do in the south. According to the 1991 Indian census, nearly 90 percent of the people of Nagaland, a tiny state on the border with Myanmar, claim to be Christian—making it the most Christianized region in all of Asia second only to the Philippines. Other tribes like the Khasis and Garos in the state of Meghalaya (once part of Assam) or the Mizos in Mizoram likewise embraced Christianity—over 85 percent of Mizos today are Christians, as are 65 percent of the people in Meghalaya. All of these people are *adivasis*, aboriginal hill people who have never been part of the Hindu mainstream.

### An Influential Minority

Christianity's impact on the Indian subcontinent has been deeper and more widespread than its minority status would suggest. Although Christians officially comprise only 2.4 percent of the Indian population (census figures that are likely underestimated), Christian schools, colleges, hospitals and printing presses have extended Christianity's impact into vast areas of resiliently non-Christian Hindu and Muslim society. Today, Christian colleges consistently rank among the nation's best, having educated many generations of India's non-Christian, as well as Christian, elites. Even Mohandas K. Gandhi, who was inspired by the life of

**Amil Bible: Tranquibur Association**

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 கிற மனம் இருக்கிற மனம்.

புதுபுகாலததிலேபாமண்டலததிலேயிரு  
நதுதிருவினமபததினசததியமாள.



பெரியசாலை

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அச்சுலெப்திககப்பபுது

**A BIBLE FOR THE PEOPLE.** Early Pietist missionaries believed that in order for Christianity to take root in India, the gospel must first be made available in the language of the common people. The Bible above, printed in 1723, is in Tamil, the language of nearly 100 million people in Tamil Nadu.

Jesus Christ, was educated at a mission school—although he opposed Christian missionaries to the end of his life (see p. 42).

## A Religious Philosophy with “Dark Cellars”

Swami Vivekananda became famous in the West for his speech to the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. There he praised the noble and rich spiritual heritage of India and persuaded his audience to recognize and elevate "Hinduism" into the rank of a "world religion." His mission to plant exotic notions of an exalted "Hindu" spirituality in the minds of Westerners remains active today in countless Vedanta Societies.

Vivekananda came to America in order to “correct” the impression given by his contemporary Pandita Ramabai, a well-known Christian convert and reformer who had been sending a very different message (see page 12). Ramabai

Continued next page



Continued from previous page

contrasted Vivekananda's "poetry" of sentiment with her "prose" of harsh reality. She wrote, "I beg my western sisters not to be satisfied with looking at the outside beauty of the grand philosophies, and not to be charmed with hearing the interesting discourses about educated men, but to open the

trap doors of the great monuments of ancient Hindoo [sic] intellect and enter into the dark cellars where they will see the real workings of these philosophies." Ramabai, who passionately ministered to India's destitute women and children, knew only too well how Hindu life could look in practice. She had lived in its strongholds, and she observed Hindu priests "oppress the

widows" and "trample the poor, ignorant, low-caste people under their heels."

#### Missionary with Style

No one better represents the high tradition of Christian scholarship in India than the Italian Jesuit Constanzo Guiseppe Beschi (1680-1747). His long list of writings—epic poems written in the classical style, philosophical treatises, commentaries, dictionaries, grammars, translations, and polemical tracts—put him at the very forefront of Tamil scholars. His lavish lifestyle also made quite an impression. Traveling in state, he wore a long tunic bordered in scarlet, covered by a robe of pale purple, with ornate sandals or slippers, white and purple turban, pearl and ruby earrings, rings of heavy gold, and a long carved and decorously inlaid staff. He was carried in a sumptuous palanquin that had a tiger's skin for him to sit upon, two attendants to fan him, someone holding a purple silk parasol surmounted by a golden ball to shield him from the sun, and a spread tail of peacock feathers going before him. In short, Beschi's circuits assumed all pomp and pageantry with which Hindu gurus usually traveled.

#### Modeling Unity for the Church

India has had an important impact on Christianity worldwide. Frustrated by the doubly divisive impact of caste and denomination on the church's witness to Hindu-Muslim culture, Indian Christians joined with missionaries to create the Church of South India (CSI) in 1947 and the Church of North India (CNI) in 1948. This was the first unification of Episcopal and non-Episcopal Protestant churches since the Reformation and provided an important model for the emerging ecumenical movement in the West.

Still, the majority of non-Catholic and non-Thomas Christians in India do not belong to either of these groups. Today, the largest and most rapidly growing Christian movement in India is Pentecostalism.

—Contributed by Steven Gertz, Robert Eric Frykenberg, Susan Billington Harper, and Keith J. White.

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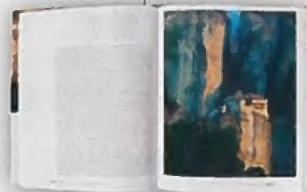
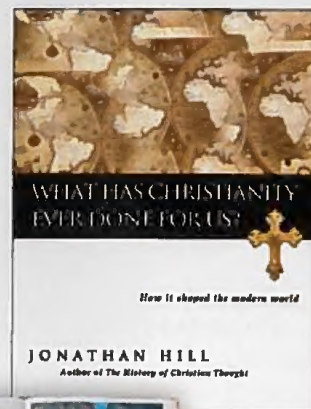
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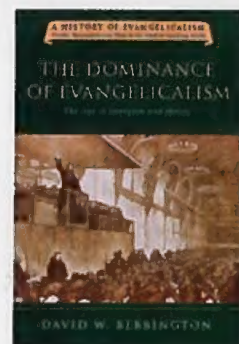
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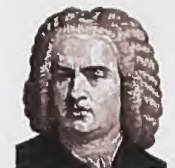
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of His people changes the world  
around them. Five hundred  
years ago, during the Protestant  
Reformation, men who were  
passionate for the Bible shined its  
light on a darkened world. That  
generation recovered the glory of  
the Gospel and gave Christians a  
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## TURN TO THE WORD THAT TURNED THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN.

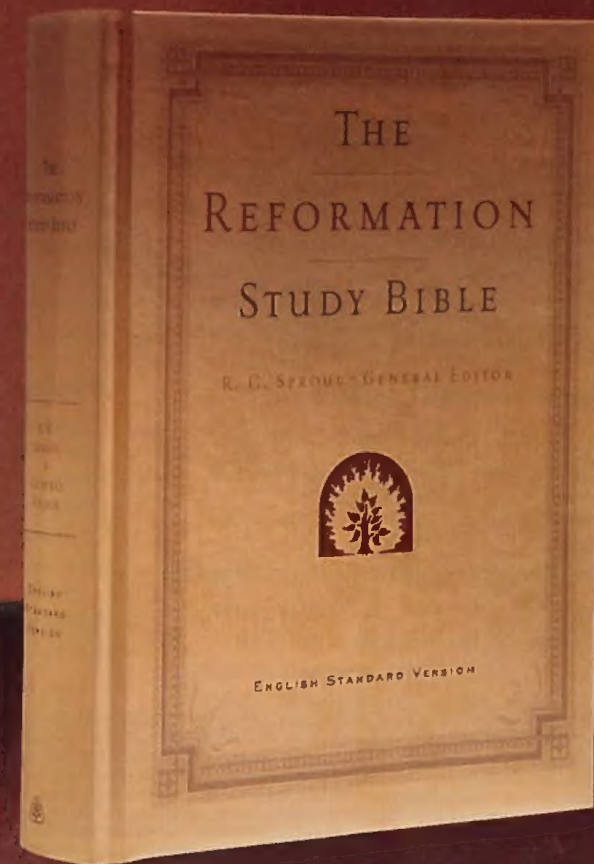


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
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## From the Editor

# Of Saris and Such



**Jennifer  
Trafton**

I have never stepped foot in India, but I once attended an Indian-American wedding in which my friend's bridesmaids walked down the aisle in colorful saris that would put a fashionable Western bridal shop to shame. *Colors*. When I first began thinking about this issue on India, that's what immediately came to mind—brilliantly decorated elephants, vibrant paint smeared on foreheads, ochre robes, and, of course, a rainbow of saris. It's a typical Western stereotype I've inherited. But as I ventured into unfamiliar terrain in order to edit Issue 87 of *Christian History & Biography*, I couldn't get colors out of my mind. Especially after I learned that the thousands of castes in India are divided into four "colors"—white, red, yellow, and black. And the lowest of the low, the "untouchables" and aboriginals, are marked as outcaste by being denied the dignity of a color class. They are the "colorless," the unseen.

I also discovered quickly that the kaleidoscope of traditions, people, movements, and unique cultural challenges that make up Indian Christianity defies the limited palette of our magazine pages. And so we have chosen to offer you a range of case studies. Apart from a few stories of pioneers like Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg, most are snapshots gathered from a transformative period in India's history when nationalists were protesting British rule, Indian intellectuals were responding to the ideas and challenges of Western culture, the idea of "Hinduism" as a world religion was beginning to take shape, Indian Christians were leading conversion movements, and converts were struggling with what it means to be both *Christian* and *Indian*.

In doing so, we've had to leave out many significant strands of this vast tapestry, notably the Thomas Christians, the Pentecostal movement in India, and the growth of Christianity among the tribal peoples in the northeast and among the outcastes (or Dalits as they now call themselves) in the 20th century. But we hope that the articles we've chosen will give you a vivid glimpse of the manifold ways in which Indian Christianity has manifested its "Indianness." (Many readers will also notice the omission of William Carey. We dedicated *Christian History* Issue 36 to him. See pages 48–49 for ordering information.)

We've set apart an entire five-page section (pp. 25–29) in the center of this issue to orient you to the places and peoples of India—here you'll find a map, a timeline, an explanation of the caste system, and a brief glossary. I encourage you to familiarize yourself with this section first and to keep your finger there as you read the other articles, to refer to when needed.

Why should Western Christians care about India? As Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh, Philip Jenkins, and others have pointed out, the center of gravity for Christianity is shifting from the West to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It is more important than ever to understand the history of Christianity in these parts of the world. These non-Western Christians ask different questions of the faith than we have asked, see the gospel through different eyes—and yet the commonalities affirm the unique power of Christianity to transcend ethnic and cultural barriers. Indian Christians' struggles with the caste system may shed light on our own culture's struggles with ethnic prejudice. Indian Christians, like ourselves, have had to think and live out their faith in the midst of a pluralistic environment and to walk a fine line between pulling away in isolation or losing the uniqueness of the gospel by accommodation. There is much we can learn from them.

One final word: This issue would have been impossible without our consulting scholar, Dr. Robert Eric Frykenberg, who has given generously of his time and his world-class expertise in order to help us bring you the most accurate and engaging portrait of Indian Christianity possible. It is indeed a many-colored faith.



# Jesus Was Her Guru

If you don't know the inner strength of an Indian woman with a divine call, you haven't met Pandita Ramabai.

KEITH J. WHITE



**THE SMALL WOMAN.** Pandita Ramabai became an immediate celebrity in America when she traveled there with her daughter Manorama in 1886.

Pandita Ramabai was just five feet tall, with short black hair and small bones. Yet wherever she went the presence of this Brahman Indian woman—characterized by her grey-green eyes, shapely lips, and light complexion—seemed to cast a spell over all whom she met. She was adored as a goddess when she arrived in Calcutta at age 20. Years later, when she addressed the 2000 delegates of the National Social Congress in Bombay in 1889 (the first woman to do so), she took the assembly by storm.

As she was preparing to speak on two resolutions for gender reform, her audience took some time to settle down. She remained silent and still until you could have heard a pin drop and then began with the remarkable words: "It is not strange, my countrymen, that my voice is small, for you have never given a woman the chance to make her voice strong!" From that moment on, she carried her enraptured listeners in the palm of her hand, and the resolutions were passed by a huge majority.

And so it was throughout much of India and then America: Audiences were moved to laughter and tears before responding with resounding applause and standing ovations. She knew many of the sacred texts of the Hindu religion by heart and had an ear for the varied cadences of the written and spoken word. But she also knew from 20 years of wandering the hard realities of everyday life for Indian women. It was a brave person who ventured to contradict this combination of academic brilliance and personal experience. She was a born leader, held in awe by the rich and famous and trusted by the poor and oppressed.

The renowned Indian social reformer D. K. Karve wrote, "Pandita Ramabai was one of the greatest daughters of India." As an outstanding linguist, author, educational pioneer, social reformer, and Bible translator, she attracted the praise of scholars, politicians, and theologians. As a strong patriot, she was the first to advocate Hindi as the national language of India and the first woman to promote allegiance to the motherland rather than to the British crown.

But her conversion to Christianity and her staunch rebuttal of Westerners' romanticizing of "Hinduism" as a new world religion drew ever-increasing opposition. Like Jesus, Ramabai found herself "outside the city" of contemporary discourses and paradigms. With the British Raj fully established and the missionary movement still operating in a Western mindset, there was little place for a woman who quietly but firmly insisted on her own cultural and personal identity and refused to accept the gatekeeping of Western denominational Christianity. Until recently this extraordinary woman had been virtually erased from history.

Perhaps this was inevitable. Ramabai was a pioneer who—way ahead of her time—challenged traditional values and stereotypes in both East and West. From the moment she first encountered Jesus, she was unwaveringly determined to follow Jesus as her *guru* and to take the Bible as



**NATIVE DAUGHTER.** Nestled at the confluence of two rivers in the western Indian state of Maharashtra, Pune (or Poona as it was then called), had once been the ancient capital of the Maratha peoples and was an educational and military center under British rule. Pandita Ramabai, whose father had studied in Pune, gained renown as a lecturer and reformer there and later established a school for high-caste widows in the city.

her guide. And she did so with an indomitable spirit inherited in part from her distinguished father, but also honed by years of suffering and trial.

## Hungry prodigy

Pandita Ramabai Dongre Medhavi (her full married name) was born on April 23, 1858, in her father's *ashram* (a religious community where devotees stayed to learn more of the Hindu faith) 4,000 feet above sea level on the forest slopes of the Western Ghats near Karkal. Her father was a renowned Brahman scholar whose search for and devotion to the One True God was a lifelong commitment. He was orthodox in his beliefs and practice, with one significant exception: He was convinced (against considerable institutional and peer pressure) that women should be allowed to learn the holy ancient language of Sanskrit and therefore have access to the Hindu scriptures.

Although he successfully argued his case from the scriptures, it seems likely that he was never fully accepted as one of the community of *bhaktas* (devotional Hindus) from this point on. When his ashram ran out of money due to his generosity, he became a wandering mendicant who, along with his family, survived by reciting the Puranas (sacred Hindu texts) at pilgrimage sites all over the subcontinent.

Ramabai was therefore on the move from an early age. Her mother taught her in the open air, and lessons lasted for three hours at a stretch. It was not long before Ramabai knew 18,000 verses of the Bhagavata Purana by heart. She also learned astronomy, botany, and physiology.

During the great famine from 1874-76, Ramabai helplessly watched her parents and sister starve to death. She and her older brother continued to wander throughout India, experiencing extreme physical hardship and hunger before finally reaching Calcutta in 1878. There her exceptional knowledge of Sanskrit texts so astonished scholars that they immediately awarded her two titles: *Pandita* (a wise person) and *Saraswati* (goddess of learning). But she had become disillusioned with ancient texts that forbade women to learn what her father had taught her, and saddened and angered by the oppression of women legitimated by a patriarchal reading of these sacred texts. She deplored the belief that "women of high and low caste, as a class, were bad, very bad, worse than demons, as unholy as untruth," as she wrote later, and that women, like people of lower castes, could not obtain *mukti* (ultimate liberation or salvation) unless by their merit they were reincarnated as Brahman men. Ramabai began to champion women's rights and education and soon became renowned in India as a lecturer.





**AWAKENED ZEAL.** Ramabai played a major role in opening Western Christians' eyes to the situation of Indian women, as this 1920s postcard from Liverpool shows. (Note Ramabai and her daughter in the upper right portion of the circle.)

### Seeking and finding

When her brother died, Ramabai shocked all who knew her by marrying someone of a lower caste. Bapu Bipin Bahari Das Medhavi was a lawyer and teacher, and together they studied Western ideas and philosophy. After considering for a time the views of the reformist group Brahmo Samaj, which sought to integrate the teachings and insights of different religions, Ramabai began to read a Bengali Gospel of Luke given to her husband by a Baptist missionary while they were living in Assam.

This was the beginning of a lengthy and tortuous process of conversion. Later she wrote, "Having lost all faith in my former religion, and with my heart hungering after something better, I eagerly learnt everything I could about the Christian religion, and declared my intention to become a Christian."

Her decision met with predictable opposition both from her husband and also from many of the Indian reformers who had seen her as a champion of the Hindu/Indian cause. There was little precedent for a woman remaining

culturally and socially Indian while at the same time embracing Christianity. One of the people who helped her greatly during this time of struggle was the Brahman convert and Anglican priest Nehemiah Goreh [see Gallery, p. 34]. She wrote: "Father Goreh preached to me from India. His humble sweet voice has pierced my heart. I think no one would have had the power of turning my heart from the Brahman religion but Father Goreh."

After less than 18 months of marriage, Ramabai's husband died of cholera, leaving her a widow with an infant daughter, Manorama. At that time in India, widows were effectively isolated from the public world for the rest of their lives, confined to the women's quarters of households and forced to devote themselves to menial tasks. But Ramabai refused to accept this status. After some hesitation and concern about compromising her personal liberty, she responded to an invitation from social reformers to lecture in Pune.

There her fame as a brilliant scholar and social activist continued to grow, and she devoted herself to alleviating the oppression of women and girls, especially child widows. She was tireless in speaking, testified before the Education Commission (where her eloquence even brought her to the attention of Queen Victoria), started women's reform organizations in Bombay and Pune, and published her first book, *Stree Dharma-Niti* (*Morals for Women*).

This book, coupled with her radical reforming zeal and the news about her move towards the Christian faith, provoked deep-seated resentment and lasting criticism from the orthodox and male reform sections of Maharashtrian (western Indian) society. With her charismatic personality, she was challenging patriarchal authority and norms.

### Jesus—without the dogma

Contemplating the study of medicine in England, Ramabai accepted an invitation in 1883 to stay at the Community of the Sisters of St. Mary the Virgin in Wantage, where she improved her English while teaching Sanskrit in return. She was greatly affected by her visit to the establishment for "fallen women" that the Sisters of Wantage helped run, as well as by the biblical story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman to which the Sisters pointed as justification for their ministry. "I realized," she later wrote, "after reading the fourth chapter of St. John's Gospel, that Christ was truly the Divine Saviour he claimed to be, and no one but He could transform and uplift the downtrodden women of India. . . . Thus my heart was drawn to the religion of Christ."

She and her daughter Manorama were baptized in Wantage. But her stay in England became one long struggle to establish her own spiritual and personal identity in the face of relentless pressures to conform to Anglican (specifically Anglo-Catholic) teaching, and she was at times anxious and depressed. This did not prevent her, however, from engaging in substantive doctrinal discussion and debate with some of the leading Anglican and Baptist theologians of the time. From September 1883 until February 1886, she attended Cheltenham Ladies' College where she found a sympathetic teacher and friend in the principal, Dorothy Beale.



**SHOWING OFF.** Indian princes had long held grand state receptions in their durbars, or courts. But when Britain assumed power in India, durbars like the one pictured here became occasions for displaying British grandeur. British authorities took advantage of one durbar to proclaim Queen Victoria Empress of India in January 1877.

## INDIA UNDER THE RAJ

The India in which Ramabai grew up was emerging into the modern world. In fact, the very name "India" was new, signifying things the people of India had never before known. The many cultures, kingdoms, and villages on the subcontinent—some having existed from earliest antiquity—had at no time been unified under a single system of government. Over the centuries, new peoples and tribes had entered the continent, mostly from the northwest, as military invaders, migrants, merchants, and mendicants. Domains of different size and strength had formed and fallen, expanded and crumbled, merged and split. What had been left behind was a rich mosaic of diverse cultures.

Europeans had also come from the sea. During the century before Ramabai's birth, the entire subcontinent had been brought together and consolidated under a single over-arching political system. Yet this system, known as "India," the "Indian Empire," or the "Raj," had never been solely the handiwork of foreigners. From its fragile beginnings in the 17th century, this had been a joint venture, a collabora-

tive experiment in which indigenous elite communities played pivotal roles. Without Indian manpower, Indian money, and Indian methods there could never have been an Indian Empire. Just as some of India's merchants had helped to construct the East India Company's commercial empire, so some military manpower enabled the Company to extend its imperial rule far and wide.

By the time Ramabai's father left Pune in 1818, armies of the Company numbered as many as 300,000 Indian *sepoys* (soldiers), and its Raj had expanded over the whole subcontinent. One year before Ramabai's birth in 1858, *sepoys* in North India rose up in a Great Mutiny (or Revolt). The East India Company was abolished and a more distant and alien British Crown took its place, with Queen Victoria being declared Empress of India. By then, the sway of the Raj stretched across the Indian Ocean from the shores of Arabia, Persia, and Africa to Burma, Malaya, and beyond.

Twenty years later, when Ramabai arrived in Calcutta, new forces were challenging the Raj. Challenges came from

within, from the very same elite communities that had helped to construct the Raj in the first place—those indispensable sinews of manpower and money and method that had made it possible. Challenges came from those who, through intellectual curiosity and dexterity, had not only demanded modern educational institutions but also gained a remarkable mastery over the English language, channels of communication, science, and technology.

The aspiring and affluent within British India were professional people—a "New India" of enlightened journalists, lawyers, physicians, teachers, bureaucrats, and even some of the landed gentry. These forward-looking elites saw themselves as "nationalists" and the "true Indians," as distinct from the tiny numbers of Europeans (Britons) who occupied the highest seats in government and whose colonial society was increasingly perceived as "alien" and "foreign."

Ramabai soon counted herself among India's ardent nationalists.

Adapted from Robert Eric Frykenberg's *Introduction to Pandita Ramabai's America* (Eerd-mans, 2003). Used by permission.





**LOVE INCOGNITO.** Dressed as a *sannyasini* (female meditant), Ramabai journeyed throughout India in 1894, trying to rescue temple prostitutes. She wrote, "They shut the young, helpless widows into their large *maths* [monasteries], sell and hire them out to wicked men . . . and, when the poor miserable slaves are no longer pleasing to their cruel masters, turn them out in the streets to beg . . . [and] die a death worse than that of starved street dogs." The perilous trip nearly took her life.

Beale made a genuine attempt to step into Ramabai's shoes and to see the unique challenges of being both "Hindu" (i.e., culturally Indian) and "Christian." Ramabai in turn shared with Beale her struggles to reconcile biblical teaching with the church's creeds and dogma, her shock at the multiplicity of Christian denominations, and her reluctance to be identified with a particular one.

Admiring the honesty and spiritual depth which drove this Indian convert to arrive at her own conclusions, Beale was not threatened by the way Ramabai articulated her guiding principles: "I believe in Christ . . . But at the same time I shall not bind myself to believe in and accept everything that is taught by the church; before I accept it I must be convinced that it is according to Christ's teaching."

#### American idol

In 1883, Ramabai was invited to Philadelphia to attend the graduation ceremony of her cousin Anandibai Joshee, India's first female doctor. She became an instant sensation in North America and made several lasting friendships with

notable figures such as Frances Willard (one of the leaders of the Women's Movement), and Rachel Bodley (Dean of the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia). She was soon convinced that her life's work in India should be to transform the situation of India's high caste women, especially child widows, by establishing an all-women's residential school modeled on the radical kindergarten system pioneered by Friedrich Froebel.

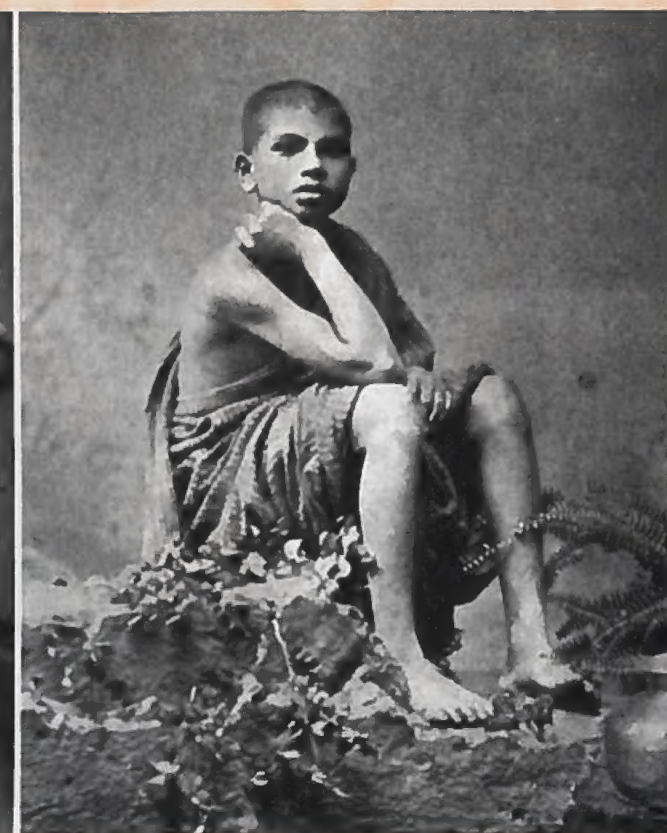
Encouraged by Rachel Bodley, she published her first English book, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, a work that increased her fame and brought invitations from far and near. As she traveled throughout the United States on speaking tours, supporters collected funds and set up a Ramabai Association to assist the formation of her proposed school. Meanwhile, she also prepared curriculum materials for six grades, read widely, collected huge amounts of resource information, and compiled her own observations about America for a book that was published (in the Marathi language) soon after her return to India. On her departure, Ramabai left behind a significant band of enthusiastic admirers, especially among the Women's Movement and the National Women's Temperance Union.

Soon after her return to India, Ramabai established her first residential school, the Sharada Sadan (House of Learning), in Bombay. In 1890 the school moved to Pune, the place where she had always intended it should be. But she encountered increasingly fierce criticism from both Christian and Hindu communities when she sought to run her school in an open and tolerant way, making Hindu and Christian texts freely available side by side. Though she was by this time a widely respected and influential figure—it was during this period that she made her famous address to the Indian National Social Conference, the forerunner of the National Congress Party—opposition continued to mount. Finally, after some of her students converted to Christianity and were baptized, there was a massive withdrawal of local support.

#### A model community

Eventually, through a combination of circumstances, Ramabai bought some land and set up a residential community in a village called Khedgaon on the railway line 40 miles away. She named the community "Mukti." For several years, Mukti's newsletter sported the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia on its cover, inscribed with the motto "Proclaim LIBERTY throughout the Land unto all the inhabitants here," from Leviticus 25:10. It was symbolic of Ramabai's own personal lifelong quest for *mukti*—freedom, rest, salvation—which she ultimately found in Christ.

Whereas the Sharada Sadan in Pune, as in Bombay, was intended for the daughters of Brahman families, Mukti was open to all women in need. Soon the place was filled to overflowing with starving child-widows, orphans, victims of famines in central India, and other needy women. At times the Mukti Mission provided for as many as 2000. In addition to housing so many women, it had a kindergarten for young children, schools, a hospital, a refuge for "fallen women," 64 cloth-weaving looms, five printing presses, tai-



**THE WIDOWS' PLIGHT.** High-caste girls betrothed since infancy who became widows faced a dismal fate. They were "walking corpses," blamed for their husbands' deaths, forced to shave their heads, and often driven from their homes. Eleven-year-old Tara (right) had been branded with hot irons.

loring and handicrafts, a flourmill, an oil press, a laundry, a farm, orchards, and wells. Ramabai managed to set up this establishment and to sustain and run it with the help of an efficient administrative staff. Among her assistants was her daughter Manorama, who joined her after returning from college in America, and who Ramabai hoped would be her eventual successor.

The intention of Mukti was that women should be accepted, nurtured, loved, trained, and equipped to take their place in Indian society whether as parents, teachers, nurses, or Bible women. It was a place of empowerment and transformation—a model Christian community following the teaching of Jesus and the life of the early Christians.

Although Ramabai never lost her desire to draw from and celebrate the best of India's native cultures, including its music, dress, literature, and traditions, Mukti was an openly Christian establishment, as evidenced by the publication of Ramabai's life-story, *A Testimony*, and many other tracts and Christian booklets. From 1905 to 1907 a "Holy Spirit" revival broke out—an event similar to revivals that were occurring in Wales, the Khasi Hills of northeast India, and Azusa Street in Los Angeles.

#### From Christianity to Christ

Despite the heavy responsibilities involved in setting up Sharada Sadan and then Mukti, Ramabai never deviated from her commitment to follow Jesus as her guru, and her

writings and correspondence show how her *bhakti* (devotional) Hindu upbringing prepared her for a life of devotion to her Lord. She studied the Bible with great care, her prayer life was regular and disciplined, and she read many Christian biographies. She was deeply influenced by the book *From Death unto Life* written by the Anglican minister Rev. William Haslam, through whose very honest testimony Ramabai came to see the distinction between formal religion (whether Hindu or Christian) and the personal relationship of faith between a devotee and her guru.

She wrote of this discovery, "Although I was quite contented with my newly-found religion, so far as I understood it, still I was labouring under great intellectual difficulties, and my heart longed for something better . . . I came to know after eight years from the time of my baptism that I had found the Christian religion, which was good enough for me; but I had not found Christ, Who is the Life of the religion and 'the Light of every man that cometh into the world.'"

For Ramabai a living faith meant a seamless interweaving of life and beliefs. She chose as her mentors in the Christian faith a few such people. Perhaps the closest to her was the Marathi poet Narayan Tilak, who had spent his life seeking to follow Christ without sacrificing his Marathi roots and culture [see Gallery, p. 35]. His poetry contained profound Indian theology, and she printed some of his songs and hymns for use in worship at Mukti.

Tilak also helped her a little with what became her mag-

Helen Dyer, *Pandita Ramabai: The Story of Her Life* (Fleming H. Revell, 1900)





**MUKTI GIRLS.** Ramabai (center, holding two infants) sits surrounded by residents of the Mukti mission. The visitors' book confirms that people traveled from all over the world to see this remarkable community in action.

num opus: the translation of the whole Bible from Hebrew and Greek into contemporary Marathi. It was in some ways a natural undertaking for such a brilliant scholar and linguist. She had benefited from the way her parents had given her access to the sacred Hindu texts by means of Sanskrit, and now she was offering the people of Maharashtra the opportunity to read the Bible in their own language.

But it was more than this. She had come to the conclusion that the key to India's transformation was Christian women going from village to village sharing their lives and the Bible with their fellow countrywomen. Because she believed that the Bible was a radical instrument of change, she was willing to devote 12 years of her life to this Marathi translation.

She completed the revision of the final drafts only hours before she died in April 1922. Her daughter Manorama had died a few months before, and Ramabai knew her mission was complete. Mukti was soundly established and would be run by those whom she knew and trusted. The Marathi Bible would be printed on Mukti presses. And former "Mukti girls" would take the message of freedom in Christ to every part of Maharashtra.

#### Forgotten saint

Mukti survives to the present day and is one of Ramabai's lasting legacies. It is a testimony to Ramabai's understanding as an Indian reformer of what it meant to "be one in Christ Jesus" regardless of social status, ethnicity, or gender. Ramabai intended that others would learn from this working model and develop her insights and methods. As

Christians worldwide explore new ways of being "church," Mukti stands as an example of an ecclesial community comprising the least and the lowest of India, focusing not on itself but on God's calling to be an agent of change in the nation.

Yet Mukti's founder has been relegated to the margins of history. A wooden cross marks her grave amid scrubby farmland not far from a railway line. She is only hazily known, if at all, in her motherland, and almost completely unknown in the wider world. It could be argued that this marginalization is exactly what Ramabai wanted. From her father and from the Sisters at St. Mary's, she had learned the virtues of the "hidden life," and she was determined to be a servant, an enabler, and a sweeper, so that in all things Jesus might be pre-eminent and glorified. Had her wishes been respected, Mukti would not even be known today as Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission: She did not want her name in the title.

But until she is "rediscovered," India and the rest of the world will be deprived of an inspiring and challenging example of Christian faith in action. Her friend and biographer Professor Nicol MacNicol concluded, "Pandita Ramabai stands at the head of a new way for India, flinging wide to her the gates of hope." That way is still in place, and the doors remain open.

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Ramabai Mukti Mission

# The Trailblazer

The first evangelical missionary to India set out to prove that the gospel does not destroy culture but transforms it from within.

DANIEL JEYARAJ

It was July 1706. The people of Tranquebar, a small Danish trading station on the Coromandel Coast in south-eastern India (modern-day Tamil Nadu), rejoiced to see the Danish ship *Sophia* anchoring in the deep waters. Tamil boatmen rushed to offload the cargo. The captain who oversaw the transfer of goods became impatient and mercilessly whipped the boatmen. But one of the passengers on the ship, a 23-year-old German missionary, objected, "Do not whip! They are people." To this the captain replied, "No, they are Malabarians [i.e., 'beasts']."

In contrast to the callous attitudes of merchants who exploited lowly workers without concern for their well being, the missionary, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg (1683-1719), had come to India for the express purpose of letting all people, high or low, know their privileges, rights, and responsibilities before God. Ziegenbalg's deep respect for the Tamil people, their culture, and their traditions left an enduring impact upon south India and had far-reaching influence. By the time William Carey, the celebrated English Baptist missionary often called the "father of the modern missionary movement," arrived in Calcutta in 1793, evangelical Christianity in India was nearly a century old. Almost every missionary method that he later developed had already been tried—by a Pietist Lutheran in Tranquebar.

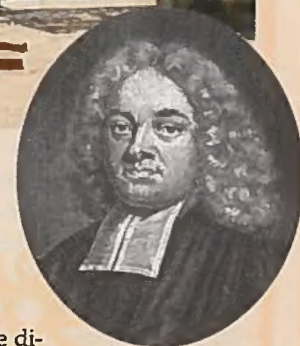
#### Pietist pioneers

Early Lutheran Reformers had associated "mission" with preaching the Word of God and administering the sacrament, leaving little place for cross-cultural missionary work. But German Pietism (sometime called "The Second Reformation") opened the door to a more holistic understanding of Christian outreach. Halle Pietist leader August Hermann Francke believed that evangelism and education went hand in hand and that every person on earth should be able to read the Bible in his or her own language and to learn some useful skill—a revolutionary vision for world mission.

A Pietist court preacher in Copenhagen persuaded King Friedrich IV to start an overseas mission in 1705. He also managed to bring two young German Pietists, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plütschau, to Copenhagen and strove to have them ordained as missionaries. The king took it for granted that the Danish Lutheran Church and the Danish East India Company (DEIC) would support his deci-



**A LEGACY IN STONE.** In 1718, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg (right) built the New Jerusalem Church in Tranquebar for Tamil Christians. Nearly three centuries later, it is still in use.



sion. This did not happen. In fact, the directors of the DEIC dispatched a secret order to the governor of Tranquebar directing him to hinder the missionaries—an order that unfortunately reached the governor before the missionaries arrived. He left them stranded on the shore.

#### A converted missionary

By 1706, Tranquebar (Tamil: *Tarangambadi*, literally "village of dancing waves") was already a flourishing trading





**LOCAL LEADER.** Aaron (1698-1745), a high-caste convert, served as a catechist and evangelist before being ordained in 1733. He was widely respected for his courage and integrity.

settlement of about 30,000 people, including 20 Danes, 500 Roman Catholics (mostly of Indo-Portuguese descent) and 2,000 Muslims. About 90 caste groups worshipped in 51 major temples and spoke 18 different languages (predominantly Portuguese and Tamil).

Soon after his arrival, Ziegenbalg ventured to bridge the gap between the Europeans and the Indians, who looked on Christianity as something foreign. He learned to speak Tamil, read Tamil literature, and carefully studied the ideas and practices of the people. In 1708 he confessed that his knowledge of the local culture had “converted” him, and he no longer viewed the Tamil people as “the uncivilized heathens,” like other Europeans did. His experience enabled him to treat the Tamils as equal partners and friends and to earn their trust in return. In fact, his commitment to justice and the welfare of the common people collided with the interests of the DEIC, which did not hesitate to imprison him for four months.

Ziegenbalg was committed to helping the Tamil Christian converts practice their faith within their own cultural setting. Once a Tamil medical doctor asked him, “Should converted Christians give up their culture and social status?” Ziegenbalg replied, “No, converted Tamils should not become Europeans! Conversion does not mean a change of outward appearance; rather it requires a change of mind and results in a transformed life.” He believed that conversion to Christian faith should re-orient the entire life of the

converts, including their cultural and religious heritage, towards Jesus Christ.

Ziegenbalg’s Tamil sermons, hymns, ethical writings, and German translations of Tamil literature demonstrate his deep cultural and religious sensitivity. Moreover, his work in Tranquebar epitomized Francke’s vision of Bible translation and universal literacy. He was the first to translate the New Testament into Tamil (printed in 1715) and began translating the Old Testament as well—a project completed by his successors B. Schultze and J. P. Fabricius. Aided by Tamil partners, he built a church and founded schools where children studied the Bible along with Tamil ethics, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and world geography. In the course of time, these children became the bearers of Tamil Christianity.

#### Tranquebar and beyond

Ziegenbalg’s colleagues tried to follow his example by continuing his translation and literary endeavors. Their many accomplishments include a treatise on Tamil medicine (1713) and the first English-Tamil Dictionary (1779). C. T. Walther, one of Ziegenbalg’s most gifted successors, observed that Tamil culture was in many ways similar to ancient Hebrew culture and sent his observations back to Germany, hoping that his insights would clarify the meaning of certain biblical customs and idioms that Europeans could not easily understand.

Walther, who believed that European missionaries were merely temporary guests and catalysts among the Tamil people, was also a strong advocate for indigenous leadership. In 1727 he encouraged Rajanayakkan, a convert from Roman Catholicism, to establish a congregation in Thanjavur—a task no European would dare to attempt since Thanjavur was an ancient citadel of Tamil power and pride. Rajanayakkan, a soldier in the army of the King of Thanjavur, also acquired a grant from the Maharajah for a model modern school. In 1733, Walther persuaded the mission authorities in Europe and the Christians in Tranquebar to ordain Aaron as the first Tamil Lutheran pastor in Thanjavur.

The Tranquebar Mission bore fruits beyond its own small region. Ziegenbalg’s colleague B. Schultze established a Lutheran mission in Madras (then the major center of the English East India Company) and became the first missionary supported by the London Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge—a remarkable example of early ecumenical cooperation linking India, Germany, Denmark, and Britain. Moreover, the *Halle Reports*, the first mission periodical newsletter or magazine (published since 1708), popularized the Tranquebar Mission not only in Western Europe but also in Russia and North America and led to the emergence of voluntary missionary societies. Ziegenbalg’s pioneering endeavors thus not only laid the foundation for tremendous growth of the church in South India in the coming century (see p. 21), but it also set the pattern for future missionary work all over the world.

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## The Faith “Goes Native”

How indigenous Christian movements radically transformed entire communities.

ROBERT ERIC FRYKENBERG

The story of conversions in India is an excellent example of the indigenous discovery of Christianity (rather than a Western Christian discovery of indigenous societies). No culture is sacred but every culture has the potential to become so. Throughout history, Christian faith has transcended ethnic, national, and cultural barriers, reshaping and redeeming the cultures it has entered. But Christian faith has also taken the shape of those “host cultures” as people in each culture recognize resonant themes in the faith.

Missionaries from abroad bring an initial stimulus, with new technologies for transmitting both Scripture and science. Those technologies serve, together with local agents, to “translate the message” into idioms that are locally acceptable and attractive. After an incubation period—during

which early converts absorb, thoroughly internalize, and adapt the gospel to their own culture—explosions of spiritual energy turn whole communities to the new faith. Nowhere can this pattern be more clearly seen than in the process that culminated in Tirunelveli (then spelled Tinnevely). From 1799 onwards, whole villages forsook old ways and turned temples into chapel-schools. Christians doubled or tripled their numbers in every decade thereafter.

#### Strategies: literacy and learning

This story starts in eastern Germany—in Halle and Herrnhut, the wellsprings of Pietism. Evangelicalism and Enlightenment were twin engines in A. H. Francke’s vision of bringing universal literacy and numeracy to every person on earth—man, woman, and child—so that each might gain



access to God's Word in his or her mother tongue.

Ziegenbalg (see p. 19) came to Tranquebar on the south-east coast of India in 1706. He built the first modern Tamil schools, printed schoolbooks, scriptures, and scientific studies. As small congregations and trained Tamil pastors and teachers proliferated, the Halle vision spread to more and more villages in the Tamil countryside. By the 1730s, Tamil evangelical leaders such as Aaron and Rajanayakkan had gained royal patronage and were building the first model school in Thanjavur. Forty years later, disciples whom C. F. Schwartz (one of Ziegenbalg's successors) had trained at higher-level schools in Thanjavur were fanning out, two by two, across the peninsula, until their chapel-schools reached Palaiyankottai in Tirunelveli Country.

Schwartz, perhaps the most remarkable of all Halle missionaries in India, was adept in Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Persian, Sanskrit, Portuguese, and other European languages, both modern and classical. A skilled preacher, teacher, schoolmaster, diplomat, and statesman, he ended his 50-year career as Raja-Guru, Protector-Regent, and "Father" to Serfoji, Maharaja of Thanjavur.

By then, gifted disciples he called "Helpers" had gone far and wide—from Tranquebar to Tiruchirapalli, to Tirunelveli, and even as far as Travancore (almost 300 miles away). This outreach occurred during times of ceaseless war, famine, and suffering. It took place in the face of implacable opposition to Christian missions from the English East India Company, whose forces were then extending their rule over much of the subcontinent.

#### Gifted disciples

Missionaries from abroad deserve only limited credit for the efforts that turned Tamil communities toward Christian faith. Time and again, adventurous and gifted converts brought the gospel to their home villages in their own tongue.

Schwartz's disciples illustrate this. As early as 1769 a Vel-lalar (from a high caste that had created a proud classical Tamil civilization) Christian soldier stationed with the East India Company's garrison at Palaiyankottai wrote Schwartz about his small congregation, begging for a pastor. In 1778, Schwartz himself came to Palaiyankottai. While there, he baptized an affluent Brahman widow whom he already knew. Christening her "Clarinda," he gave her a place of leadership within the small congregation. Clarinda, with help from a Vellalar catechist-disciple named Rayappan, ran the local school and endowed the building of a proper (*pukka*) "prayer/school" hall. She was not satisfied until her small congregation had its own full-fledged and properly trained pastor-teacher.

The person sent to tend the congregations was

Satyanathan Pillai. Satyanathan came from a highborn Vel-lalar family in Thanjavur. A veteran Schwartz disciple, he had served as pastor-teacher of the suburban village "prayer hall" as well as the city congregation of Thanjavur. When Satyanathan first came to Tirunelveli in 1783, Schwartz also recruited a brilliant youth named Vedanayakam Pillai and took him back to Thanjavur where, in due course, he became the most renowned Tamil scholar-writer of the age. The Maharajah later recognized Vedanayakam's achievements and bestowed on him the title of Sastri (Master of Learning). Meanwhile, from 1790 onward, after he was ordained as the very first Tamil evangelical missionary, Satyanathan began to lead what was to become India's first extraordinary and rapid Christian conversion movement.



**MASTER OF LEARNING.**

Vedanayakam Sastri's renowned brilliance and immense literary output had a profound impact on Tamil Christian thought and literature.

#### Back from the dead

This process accelerated in 1797. A young Shanar (low-caste) convert, Sundaranandam David, returned from Thanjavur and launched a radical *bhakti* (or "spiritual or devotional") movement among his own people. Schwartz, aged and failing, had trained and sent him to help Satyanathan. The movement began when Sundaranandam's relatives, blinking their eyes at his sudden appearance as if from the dead, heard the wonders of his conversion. Soon after they themselves had embraced the gospel, four families at Vijayaramapuram, not far away, asked for instruction.

Then Shanars at Shanmugapuram and surrounding villages also joined him. Satyanathan and Sundaranandam found themselves talking and talking with people who allowed them "not

even a quarter of an hour's leisure." For 16 days, they worked night and day. Shanars, treated with respect for the first time in their lives, responded in droves. One relative explained, "I am glad to see that you behave so kindly towards us and make no distinction of caste." Whole villages began to turn Christian. Soon, thousands of Shanars (who now began to call themselves "Nadars," or "Lords") flocked to embrace the new faith.

This, in turn, aroused the wrath of landlords. Fearing loss of the free labor landlords believed was due them, they called for the warlords. Toughs and "club-men" from Ramnad descended upon the new communities and "plundered, confined, and tortured" them, pulling down their mud-thatch huts and prayer-schools, burning their books, and exposing them to insults, intimidation, and violence. This persecution coincided with wars then tearing apart much of south India. Beyond fortified towns and villages, devastation, famine, and pestilence stalked the land. Thousands of Christians lost everything and saw lives destroyed, prayer-schools and dwellings pulled down, property taken, and



**TAMIL CHRISTIANS IN PRAYER.** In village churches like this one in Jothimanickam, near Madurai, women and men sit on opposite sides of the center aisle, and the women pull the ends of their saris over their heads during the worship service. This church, like many others, has struggled with caste issues.

families beaten, stripped, and sent into the jungle to die.

Sundaranandam, charismatic and fiery, led the movement after Satyanathan's health began to fail and he retired to Thanjavur. Thereafter, constant persecution and martyrdom set a pattern that would be replicated in other movements of mass conversion. During the century that followed, whenever whole villages turned Christian en masse, persecution would follow.

#### Villages of refuge

Desperation inspired creativity. The first "Village of Refuge," modeled on biblical lines, was called "Mudalur" or "First Village." It was so successful that other settlements soon followed (i.e. Bethlehem, Nazareth, Jerusalem, Samaria, Galilee, Megnanapuram, Sawyerpuram, Anandapuram, Dohnavur, and many more). Voluntary "self-help" societies were formed within each village to care for the needy, those fleeing their homes, the sick, poor, widows, and orphans.

As numbers of Christians doubled, missionaries began to arrive. They helped to build institutional infrastructures. Eventually, schools, printing presses, colleges and seminaries for training leaders, and hospitals followed. Pietistic communities of Tirunelveli Country became so numerous, prosperous, and strong that in the long run they helped, in some measure, to transform local Hindu culture and society.

In 1816, James Hough, a military chaplain and disciple of Cambridge pastor Charles Simeon, arrived. He had forsaken a Church of England "living" to serve God in India. He found 53 thriving congregations meeting in thatch-roofed prayer-houses, where children recited Scripture and copied verses onto palm leaf (*cajan*) books, and where worshippers tarried to sing hymns "to a late hour." They gave him a joyful welcome. Hough opened schools, using his own funds to erect small buildings, hire schoolmasters from Thanjavur, and buy books from Tranquebar. By 1819, with help from the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.) and the Church Mission Society (C.M.S.), 15 Tamil schools were serving 551 students and two English schools were teaching 59 students. Two more "villages of refuge" were also founded, Pohlayarpuram and Houghayarpuram.

The arrival of Karl Rhenius in 1820 radically transformed prospects for Tirunelveli's evangelical Christians. An ex-soldier from Berlin, with Moravian leanings, he had come to India under the fledgling C.M.S. at a time when the English were hard to enlist. He was later described as "one of the ablest, most clear-sighted and practical, and most zealous missionaries that India has ever seen" and as the "Apostle to Tirunelveli." A charismatic and fiery individual with a superb command of Tamil, he had a vision for social revolution.

"Pilgrims," again trained and sent out two by two across the countryside, quickly brought fresh outbreaks of mass





Clarinda's church-school, dedicated in 1785

conversion. Shanar (a.k.a. Nadar) villages were the most responsive, but converts also came from other communities, including some landholding Vellalars. Again, whole villages turned Christian. Sometimes converts threw images of village deities into wells and transformed local temples into prayer-school halls. Again, when persecution broke out, new villages of refuge sprang up. Dohnavur, for example, was endowed by a Swedish-Prussian Count to whom Rhenius had written. It was here that Amy Carmichael would later establish her well-known ministry to girls fleeing temple prostitution.

On June 2, 1830, an assembly of Tirunelveli congregations founded their own Philanthropic Society (Dharma Sangam). During severe persecution, with landed gentry throwing up resistance, this society showed how converts could help one another and strengthen themselves by setting up a permanent endowment for purchasing new villages of refuge where new Christians might live in peace. One such endowment, made by David Pillai Asirvatham, a prominent Vellalar Christian, was celebrated in a special *kal-natu* ("founding" ceremony) on December 15, 1836, and christened Suvisesha-puram ("Gospel-village"). By that time, members of congregations numbered 11,186. Two decades later, this number had grown to 46,047. (Catholic Tamil Christians in Tirunelveli villages numbered roughly the same.)

One strength of this movement lay in its inner support structures. Tirunelveli congregations themselves, among their hundreds of schools, systematically promoted female education and fostered voluntary societies for charitable purposes. In every Christian village, congregations assembled each morning and evening at the ringing of a bell for united prayer. Each congregation was governed by its own *panchayat* or "council of five," the pastor and schoolmaster sitting with headman and elders, so that conflicts could be resolved and standards of behavior maintained. Following the Halle pattern, within a system of universal education, each person was continuously drilled in truths of the faith. All, old and young alike, were expected to memorize and recite Scriptures, doctrines, and duties. Small groups examined each other in basics. Baptism and communion could be

delayed, sometimes years, until rigorous tests were passed.

By 1831, overarching structures had begun to knit congregations together. Coffers of the Dharma Sangam remained full, reaching 13,320 rupees in 1858 (a rupee, then worth half a dollar, could feed a family well for a fortnight). The Bible and Tract Society (and Press), founded in 1822, printed 45,000 tracts and boasted a 1,237-rupee surplus. The Shanti Sangam (Peace Society), Suvisesha-fanam ("Gospel-penny" or Poor Fund), Widow's Fund, and Missionary Society that sent its members (known as *Desanthari* or "Pilgrims") to every village where no conversions had yet occurred, along with several hundred schools and two colleges for training leaders (some teachers being non-Christian Vellalars), were all locally supported.

These voluntary associations gave Tirunelveli congregations a sturdy sense of self-reliance and independence. During these years, there was little dependence upon colonial (European or Western) resources, motifs, or styles. Most importantly, these Christians remained culturally Tamil—in art, architecture, poetry, and music. Works by Vedanayakam Sastri, and later H. A. Krishna Pillai's epic *Rakshany Yatrikam*, an adaptation of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* in 4000 verses within the idiom of classical poetry, brought Tamil evangelical culture to its zenith. The cultural contributions of Tamil Christians serve to silence those who charge that Christianity in India was never more than an "alien" imposition of "cultural imperialism."

#### Repeated story

The story of Tirunelveli evangelical Christianity provides a template that can be applied to the story of every other major conversion movement in India over the past two centuries. The same pattern of Christian expansion was replicated among Pulaiyars in Travancore (now Kerala), among Malas and Madigas in Andhra, as well as among all the aboriginal peoples, such as the Khonds, Mundas, Santals, Garos, Mizos and Nagas, dwelling along the forested escarpments of India's internal and external frontiers and maritime shorelines. Hundreds of such stories, each reflecting unique peculiarities of its own processes of inception, incubation, and expansion under indigenous impetus, can be told.

In virtually every instance, a local culture was Christianized within a community that was either excluded from the great traditions of Sanskrit civilization or had not yet been significantly touched by that civilization. Nor had any such culture yet felt the full impact or attraction of Islamic civilization. This meant that, when touched by the gospel, as conveyed by the combined forces of Pietistic Evangelicalism and Pietistic Enlightenment coming out of Germany, together with modern sciences, printing presses, medical facilities, and technologies, such cultures were open to radical transformation.

CH&B

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# Christianity in India

## ANCIENT BEGINNINGS



**52**  
According to tradition, the Apostle Thomas arrives in India and establishes seven congregations.

**c. 189**

Pantaenus, a missionary from Alexandria, arrives in India.

**c. 200**

The Syriac *Chronicle of Edessa* describes a "church of the Christians" in India.

**345**

During the Great Persecution in Persia, Thomas a Kana leads 400 Christian refugees to the Malabar coast.

**883**

Anglo-Saxons bishops sent by King Alfred visit the tomb of St. Thomas (Mylapore).



**c. 1293**

Marco Polo stays on the Coromandel Coast, describes the tomb of St. Thomas as a place of pilgrimage, and visits Christians and Jews in Quilon.

**1502**

Thomas Christian leaders ask Vasco da Gama for an alliance against Muslim predators.



Moghul India: Delhi

## THE DAWN OF MISSIONS

**1542**

Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier and two Tamil assistants teach the Apostles' Creed, Lord's Prayer, and Ten Commandments to Paravars (fisherfolk on Coromandel Coast), baptizing 10,000 in a single month.

**1606**

Roberto de Nobili begins a 50-year career in the Jesuit Madurai Mission, adopting Brahman culture and becoming a renowned scholar and poet.

**1622**

*Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* is created to send missionaries into areas of India outside of Portuguese *Padroado* authority.

**1653**

At Koonen Cross, some Thomas Christians declare independence from Roman Catholic authority.



**1706**

German Pietists Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plütschau reach Tranquebar and establish a printing press and charity school.

**1710**

Jesuit missionary Constanzo Giuseppe Beschi begins a spectacular career as the greatest Tamil scholar of the age.

**1733**

Aaron becomes the first Tamil evangelical pastor in Thanjavur.

**1750**

C. F. Schwartz begins career as a renowned evangelical missionary-statesman-scholar, diplomat, and mentor to leaders of later mass conversion movements in Tirunelveli.

**1773**

Indian Empire (Raj) established.



**1792**

William Carey's *Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of Heathens* evokes waves of evangelical missionary voluntarism.

**1799**

Serampore Mission established by William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and David Ward.

**1813**

American Congregationalists (A.B.C.F.M.) found the Maratha Mission. Other missions soon follow.

**1833**

Charter Renewal Act allows for full entry of missionaries into India.

**1833**

American Presbyterians begin work in Punjab and build a strong educational system.

**1838**

Jesuit order, restored by Gregory XVI, returns to its Madurai Mission after an absence of 64 years.

**1841**

Welsh Presbyterian missionaries in the Khasi Hills build educational infrastructures; local Christians later lead conversion movements until over 95% percent of all Khasis become Christians.

**1844**

First Synod of Pondicherry launches Catholic reforms.

**1848**

Nehemiah (Nilakantha) Goreh is ordained as an Anglican priest.

**1855**

Abolition of slavery in Travancore (Kerala) opens the way for mass conversions among untouchables, lower castes, and former slave castes.

## CHRISTIAN HISTORY & BIOGRAPHY TIMELINE

Compiled by Robert Eric Frykenberg

## THE AGE OF EMPIRE

**1857**

The Great Mutiny begins, followed the next year by the replacement of the East India Company by the British crown.

**1866**

Maulvi Imad id-din, ordained scholar-missionary, wins renown for apologetic writings reconciling Christian faith and Muslim culture.

**1876**

Naga Christians establish a "village of refuge" where American missionaries translate Scripture, set up schools, and lay the foundation for movements by which over 95% of Nagas eventually become Christians.



**1886**

Pandita Ramabai makes a triumphant tour of the United States.

**1886**

Catholic hierarchy of India established.

**1888**

Mar Thoma Evangelistic Association founded, with missionaries reaching out to low-caste peoples, forming ashram-like settlements.

**1888-89**

Salvadorians, led by German missionaries, arrive in Khasi Hills and gain first converts.

**1891**

Brahmabandhav Upadhyay is baptized as an Anglican; later joins the Catholic church.

**1894**

H. A. Krishna Pillai, renowned Christian poet, publishes a classical Tamil version of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

**1894**

National Papal Seminary established at Kandy (moves to Pune in 1950s) to promote indigenization of the Indian Catholic hierarchy.



**1895**

Narayan Vaman Tilak (1862-1919), celebrated Brahman poet, makes a quest of reconciling Hindu heritage with devotion to Christ.

**1899**

Two Mizos become Christians, five years after missionary arrival. (Today Mizo Christians make up 86% of the population of Mizoram.)



**1904**

Sundar Singh has a vision of Christ and becomes a wandering Christian *sadhu*.

**1905**

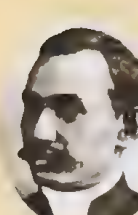
"Holy Spirit Revival" and speaking in tongues among devout school girls at Pandita Ramabai's Mukti Mission attracts world-wide attention.

**1905-06**

Revival in the Khasi Hills, with 8,000 converts, spreads to surrounding areas.

**1910**

First World Missionary Conference meets in Edinburgh.



**1912**

V. S. Azariah becomes first Indian Anglican bishop; his efforts in Dornakal inspire the conversion of over 200,000 Malas and Madigas and provoke conflict with Gandhi.

**1923**

Bishop Tibertius Roche becomes first Indian head of a Latin Rite diocese (in Tamil Nadu).

**1927**

Amy Carmichael founds Dohnavur Fellowship for rescuing child temple prostitutes; becomes friend of Gandhi.

## TOWARD THE CONTEMPORARY ERA



**1947**

Independence of India, accompanied by the Partition of the Indian Empire into India and Pakistan, followed the next year by the forming of independent Burma and Ceylon.

**1947**

Church of South India is formed, combining formerly Anglican, Congregationalist, Reformed, and Methodist denominations; soon followed by Church of North India (CNI).



**1948**

Mohandas K. Gandhi is assassinated.

**1951**

Mother Teresa (Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu) forms the Catholic Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta.

**1960s**

Freedom of Religion Acts bolster Hindu efforts to stop Christian conversion

**1961**

Third World Council of Churches, held in New Delhi, leads to the formation of the World Council of Churches as a permanent body with headquarters in Geneva.

**1977**

Indian Supreme Court defines evangelist's work as a threat to the "freedom of conscience" guaranteed to all citizens of India.

**2002**

Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion Ordinance passed.



## THE SOCIAL CONTEXT: CASTE AND "COLOR"

In India, every living thing is seen as having features intrinsic to its "birth" (*jati*). Among people, there are roughly 3000 separate "birth groups" or "castes" (*jatis*), each so ethnically distinct that, by tradition, intermarriage and interdining between castes has been unthinkable. No two of these castes can be mingled or mixed, it is believed, without causing cosmic chaos or confusion. (To do so would be like mating a chicken with a cobra.)

Thousands of years ago, Brahman elites began to devise and perfect a system for ranking castes according to degrees of inherited "purity" or "pollution." They fitted *jati* or caste into a hierarchical social structure of four categories. Each category or class, symbolized by a "color" (*varna* in Sanskrit), contains hundreds of castes. (See table below.)

Every male belonging to a caste within the top three *varnas* is "twice born" (*dvija*). Initiated at the age of eight, when "sacred and secret" family knowledge is whispered into his ear, he begins rigorous training in unique family skills. Each person's inherited knowledge (*veda*) is sacred. Together, all castes within the three highest *varnas* make up roughly 15 percent of the population (5 percent in each *varna*). Shudras are called "once born" and number 40 to 50 percent of the entire population.

As if this were not complicated enough, two groups of castes fall outside this ranking system. The first category, constituting some 15 percent of the population (or an estimated 200 million), has many names: *avarnas* ("colorless," hence unseen), Panchamas ("fifths"), outcastes, untouchables, depressed classes, or Scheduled Classes. Gandhi's name for them, *Harijans* ("Children of Krishna") is abhorred. They now call themselves Dalits—"crushed" or "oppressed" peoples. They are still viewed as extremely polluting and subhuman, little better than animals or livestock, and

used for the most disgusting or polluting of tasks (cutting carcasses, working leather, or removing dung). They are allowed to dwell only "outside the village," far from proper wells or temples, and have often been subject to debt bondage and other atrocities.

Also beyond the pale are the *adivasi* (aboriginal or tribal) peoples. Living freely on forested frontier escarpments, these fierce warrior peoples refuse to submit to subhuman status and deliberately remain beyond the reach of either Sanskrit or Islamic domination. *Avarnas* are thought by many to be "domesticated" *adivasis*—people who are no longer wild or dangerous.

Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis (Zoroastrians), and others, while technically outside the caste system, are also stratified, ranked higher or lower depending upon lineages and styles of life, so that no one can totally escape being categorized in a caste.

When a person from a caste in one of the *varnas* converts to Christianity, whether that person becomes outcaste in the eyes of his or her own community depends on at least two factors: whether "pollution" has occurred (for example, through ingestion of polluting substances or through intermarriage) and whether a formal excommunication has been pronounced. Even so, in violation of Christian doctrine, Brahmans who become Christians tend to be seen as "Brahman Christians." Similarly, within churches, Shudra Christians and *avarna* Christians tend to remain separate, as do different *adivasi* tribes such as Naga Christians and Mizo Christians—with the result that there are hundreds of "hyphenated" Christian communities. Dual identity remains a serious challenge to Christian witness in South Asia.

—Robert Eric Frykenberg

Varna Name	Varna Color	Attributes of Persons Belonging to Castes within this Varna
Brahman	White	The very name Brahman, coming from the root meaning cosmic or divine "breath," suggests that Brahmans are genetically able to perform the highest levels of intellectual, rational, and ritual skills, whether in religious or in secular occupations.
Kshatriya	Red	The genetic makeup of the Kshatriya castes fits them for deeds of valor, whether as warriors or as rulers. Persons of Kshatriya status often hold the "sword" and rule over others, whether as petty lords, princes, soldiers, military officers, or politicians.
Vaishya	Yellow	Also called Baniya (or Vaniya), people in such castes are highly skilled in banking, business, industry, and entrepreneurial enterprises that produce wealth.
Shudra	Black	Members of this lowest rank are often small farmers or artisans, people who use their muscles and dexterity in numerous kinds of work. Their sweat and toil, often reinforced by bonded or landless labor of outcastes, have been the backbone of agrarian economy. They are thought to be descended from ancient conquered people ( <i>dasyas</i> ). The label Shudra is resented by non-Brahman gentry who see themselves as former warriors and rulers in their own domains.



**WHAT CAN WASH AWAY MY SINS?** Bathing in the Ganges River, considered the most sacred river in India, is a ritual many travel miles to undergo in order to remove bad karma (actions which influence reincarnation).

## TERMS TO KNOW

**Hindu:** Anything that is native to India, especially Indian culture, hence not exclusively referring to "Hinduism." Thus there can be Hindu Muslims and Hindu Christians.

**Hinduism:** A term invented by Europeans, especially Christian missionaries, as a way of integrating into one concept all of the diverse ideas, religious practices, and institutions they discovered in India.

**Sanskrit:** The sacred or "divine" language of ancient India, codified by Panini around 400 B.C. Most classical texts are written in Sanskrit. No longer a living language, like its distant cousins Greek and Latin, it is still much studied and used for religious exercises, worship, and incantations (*mantras*).

**Vedas:** *Veda* means "knowledge." But Hindus also use the term to describe the entire corpus of literature they deem sacred, including the Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka, and the Upanisads. Each of the four Samhita collections is known as a Veda, and other texts lay claim to the distinction of being a "fifth Veda." Christians call the Bible their "Veda."

**Vedanta:** "End of the Veda"; includes a huge corpus coming after the Upanisads, including Sutras and Sastras, as well as influential philosophical schools. One of these, Advaita (Non-Dualism or Monism), expounded by Sankara in the 8th century, stresses the

essential oneness of all that exists, individual souls and ultimate being (*Brahman*).

**Brahman:** Two meanings, easily confused, are linked in one essence: (1) a person within the higher category of Hindu castes; and (2) "sacred power" or "divine breath" of Cosmic Totality. Thus, in Vedantic thought, it is the impersonal transcendent principle or Ultimate Reality underlying all existence, to which access can be sought through discipline (*yoga*). Some believe that this power is embodied in particular deities. Different traditions have different views on how humans beings relate to Brahman.

**Mukti:** Also called *moksha*, *mukti* is "freedom," "liberty," "liberation," "release," or "salvation." It refers to "absorption" into timeless Existence (*Brahman*) and freedom from all suffering and sorrow (as distinct from the Buddhist concept of nirvana or "extinction into nothingness").

**Bhakti:** "Devotion" or "adoring worship" of a deity or deities, especially in theistic traditions. Bhakti-yoga or "disciplined devotion or emotion" is one of three pathways to *mukti*, along with *gnana-yoga* ("disciplined-reason, or meditation") and *karma-yoga* ("disciplined action").

**Guru:** Any teacher, guide, mentor, or pandit who accepts and instructs another person, usually younger, as a student, apprentice, or disciple (*sishtya* or *chela*), often in some spiritual discipline.



# A Church Reborn

Catholicism emerged out of decline and disarray to become the largest Christian community in India.

FELIX WILFRED

"India, your children will be the ambassadors of your salvation," said Pope Leo XIII in 1886. Pope Leo's farsighted prediction reveals a deeper assumption that has proven true again and again: No Christian tradition can thrive in India until the Indian people make it their own.

Through the work of pioneering Jesuit missionaries such as Francis Xavier, Roberto de Nobili, and Constanzo Beschi, Catholic Christianity had begun to strike its roots in Tamil Nadu, the southern part of the country, from the 16th to the 18th century. But in the late 18th century, the church entered a period of severe decline almost to the point of extinction. It was a time of religious crisis in Europe, and the suppression of the Jesuit order in 1773 deprived the mission field of workers. Without adequate leadership by local pastors, some Christians in India relapsed into former ways and some others were forced to convert to Islam.

In addition, Catholic leaders abroad were locked in an ecclesiastical quarrel that had sapped the energies of the church for centuries. The Portuguese in India enjoyed the privileges of royal patronage. Called *Padroado*, these were rights granted by popes to kings of Portugal to look after church affairs and even to appoint bishops. Frustrated by the *Padroado*, the Vatican had tried to centralize its mission work in 1622 by establishing the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*). The conflict—often within the same village—between pastors, missionaries, and bishops of *Padroado* on the one side and those directly under Rome on the other revealed a church divided within itself and lacking singleness of purpose.

But with the strenuous labors of religious societies like the Foreign Missionaries of Paris, along with the restoration of the Jesuits and their return to India in the 1830s, the Catholic mission began to experience an awakening. The division of mission territories into Vicariates Apostolic in 1845 helped to give great cohesiveness to missionary work. And into the turmoil of Bombay came the peacemaking skills of Swiss missionary Anastasius Hartmann. A man renowned for gentle firmness, the new bishop worked to restore order

and at one point refused to yield a church to those who perpetuated the schism, even when his opponents blockaded him inside. In serving as a mediator between Catholic communities he was helped by British officials of the imperial government, who were employing Catholic military chaplains. *The Examiner*, a Catholic magazine Hartmann founded, served to alleviate confusion and build unity.

Catholicism in India was on the threshold of revival.

## Reorganization and reform

In 1841 the French missionary Melchior de Marion Brésillac arrived in India determined "to direct all my own work and thought towards training a native clergy . . . which has hardly been thought about yet at all." But he encountered such frustration that he finally gave up and returned to France.

Brésillac was not the only one to realize this enormous weakness in the Catholic presence in India. Clément Bonnard, the gifted Bishop of Pondicherry, helped generate a spirit of renewal that prompted at least some Catholics to respond by trying to make Christianity truly Indian in its interpretation, symbols, theology, and leadership. With official backing from Rome, Bonnard strongly supported many reform efforts. In 1844 he convoked a groundbreaking synod that resolved to promote the ordination of indigenous priests and the founding of seminaries to better train them. Bonnard himself set up a printing press for the diffusion of Christian knowledge, established primary schools, trained catechists, and encouraged the founding of new indigenous congregations and religious orders to serve in the fields of education, charity work, and health care. What emerged from these multifarious initiatives was nothing less than a new vision for Catholicism in India.

Pope Pius IX had such great trust in Bonnard that he appointed him Apostolic Vicar in 1858 and sent him on a visitation tour throughout India in order to report on the state of the Christian communities in various parts of the country. Bonnard's extensive report revealed that in six major Vicariates there was not a single Indian priest, and in six others there was no seminary. It was a wake-up call to the Catholic mission.

**FIRM FOUNDATIONS.** Worshippers take part in Good Friday observances at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Valiapally, Kerala. According to a 2001 census, Catholics make up 1.51% of the total population of India and 70% of the Christian population.



Sean Spengler / Photo Agora

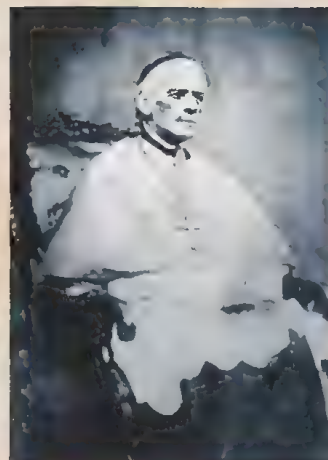


### Trickle-down evangelism

Though some missionaries still resisted the idea, most agreed that the Indian Catholic community should be served by an indigenous clergy and hierarchy. But an indigenous clergy first required an educated laity from which potential priests could come.

In an effort to create a modern educational system that would teach local elites to speak English and serve the goals of the administration, British officials of the Raj offered to fund any group willing to establish and run schools. Protestants had already established school systems and colleges in this way. Beginning in the second half of the 19th century, the Catholics—particularly the Jesuits—launched networks of primary schools and colleges, including St. Joseph's College in Tamil Nadu, St. Xavier's College in Calcutta, and many other institutions.

The motivation behind such organized efforts in the field of higher education was the hope that Christian influence on elites studying at these institutions would trickle down to the rest of society. Only a small percentage of elites actually converted to Christianity, but the result of this missionary



**BISHOP BONNAND  
OF PONDICHERRY**

zeal was a widespread and high-caliber system of college and universities throughout the continent and the training of some of the country's foremost leaders in various fields.

### Mission to the margins

Educating the elite did not, however, entail neglecting the marginalized. The spirit of social reform sweeping across Indian society awakened the need for more organized social involvement. Besides schools, Catholics established dispensaries, hospitals, and other centers of medical care, mostly in rural areas, and engaged in charitable work such as taking care of widows and orphans. Catholic support contributed to the enactment of

legislation in 1856 that challenged the traditional Hindu stricture on remarriage of widows.

Outreach to "the least of these" owed much to the contributions of Catholic women. The entry of female missionaries into fields long dominated by men brought a new quality to Catholic mission activity in the 19th century. One of the earliest women's religious orders to set foot in India was the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny. In 1827, women of this order

reached Pondicherry and started schools for girls.

Most remarkable were the indigenous women who joined new religious orders founded in India itself, many of which deliberately aimed to serve poor, illiterate women, including widows. One of these female religious orders recruited candidates chiefly from among the "untouchables" in order to counter the general prejudice against and exclusion of such outcasts in Indian society. Rooted in the soil and fluent in the language, local Indian women were able to carry out missionary work more effectively than their European sisters.

Christianity gained the strongest foothold among the poorest and most remote communities. Huge numbers of untouchables joined the Catholic fold in the 19th century hoping to find not only spiritual nourishment but the human dignity and respect they had for so long been denied by the rest of society.

In the northern part of the country, Catholics, like Protestants, met with great success among the *adivasis* (aboriginal tribes) in the last decades of the century. Among the Mundas and Oraons of Jharkhand, for example, the Belgian priest Constant Lievens gained an enthusiastic following by defending the tribal people against the landlords and moneylenders who were oppressing them. In the Khasi Hills of Assam, the German Salvadorians and later the missionaries of the Society of Don Bosco ministered to the illiterate, the poor, and the young.

The conversion of so many outcaste peoples, however, sharpened the issue of caste hierarchy among Christians and divided the Catholic communities. Churches had long practiced separate seating for high-caste and low-caste members and even created separate cemeteries. Missionaries themselves disagreed over the correct response to the caste system. Some considered it diametrically opposed to Christianity. Others thought of it as a social practice that must be tolerated for the greater good of "saving souls." Repeated appeals to Rome for a clear directive were in vain, and the general rule was to compromise and to accommodate to the local social custom. To this day, caste division and prejudice continue to be a scandal in the church.

### Catholic success

The caste system was one of many challenges faced by the Catholic church in India. Whereas 19th-century Protestants could boast many outstanding leaders, apart from a few exceptional personalities like Bishop Hartmann in Bom-

bay and Bishop Bonnard in Pondicherry, there was a dearth of great leadership in the Catholic community. Moreover, missionaries of different religious orders and nationalities were often pitted against each other, sometimes to the point of public acrimony.

In 1886 Pope Leo XIII tried to resolve the conflicts between *Padroado* and *Propaganda* by establishing a centralized Catholic hierarchy for India. At that time, all the bishops were foreigners. But the pope's determination that Indian



**THE PATRON SAINT OF NAVIGATORS.** Pilgrims pay homage at the tomb of St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552) in the Church of the Good Jesus in Goa. The adventurous Jesuit missionary had great success among the low-caste fisher folk of the Coromandel Coast, teaching them basic tenets of the Christian faith and baptizing thousands. Xavier later traveled to Japan and China, but after his death his body was returned to India.

Christians would be the ambassadors of salvation to their own nation in time yielded rich fruits. In 1893 he founded the Papal Seminary in Kandy, Sri Lanka (later transferred to Pune) to train indigenous priests. In 1896 he appointed three Indian bishops. And in 1923 Tibertius Roche—one of the descendants of the fisher folk of southeast India whom Francis Xavier had evangelized in the 16th century—became the first Indian head of a Latin Rite diocese in India. The indigenization of the Catholic hierarchy had officially begun.

Buttressed by an increasingly native clergy, a widespread system of schools and universities, and an organized mission of social outreach, by the time of Indian independence the Catholic church stood poised to explode in growth and influence. Its success touches upon irony: Today, struggling Western parishes are importing Indian priests. Ambassadors indeed.

CH&B

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## WHEN IN INDIA, DO AS THE INDIANS

The strategy of many 19th-century missionaries to spread the gospel among the elites had an early precedent in the extraordinary tradition set by Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656). Settling in the south Indian temple-city of Madurai in 1606, the Jesuit missionary was determined to reach Brahmans by becoming, at least in appearance and learning, a Brahman himself. He stopped eating meat, donned a long ochre garment and a turban, applied sandal paste to his forehead, and wore a sacred thread across his chest, just as the Brahmans did. His outward appearance was that of a true Hindu *sannyasi* (world-renouncer). Identifying himself as an Indian, he came to be known by his Indian name: Tattuwa-Bhodakar. Adept alike in Tamil, Telugu, and Sanskrit, he engaged in dialogues and debates with Brahman scholars. De Nobili reasoned that if Christianity was presented in a way the high-caste Hindus could relate to, they would realize its truth. In his view, when the upper castes converted, the conversion of the lower castes would then follow.

De Nobili's efforts to adapt Christianity to local thought patterns, customs, and manners scandalized other missionaries (including those of his own Jesuit order) and provoked censure and condemnation from Rome. But in the long run, he proved to be far ahead of his time. He is now recognized as a pioneer of the inculturation so ardently advocated by the Second Vatican Council.

—Felix Wilfred



**EVANGELIZING THE ELITE.** Brahmans like these were the targets of many Christian missionary endeavors in the late 19th century. But the "trickle-down" approach to evangelism—convert the higher castes first, and the rest of society will follow—had already been tried centuries earlier by Jesuits like Roberto de Nobili.

Bishop Bonnard: Dr. Sampathkumar; Brahmans: Chiplat.com

Hulton-Deutsch Collection / CORBIS



## GALLERY

# Brahman Christians

How do Christian beliefs relate to Indian philosophy and culture?  
These Indian thinkers came up with different answers.

RICHARD FOX YOUNG AND TIMOTHY C. TENNENT

While no 19th-century census tells us how many north Indian Christians came from the Brahman caste, they were surely few. Numbers aside, theirs was an influential elite. Of the many advantages they enjoyed, literacy was the greatest. As custodians of the sacred "word," Brahmins leaped ahead to acquire new languages and knowledge as times changed. Under the British Raj, Brahmins learned English; for a few, this was their entrée into Christianity. For others, European missionaries' use of Sanskrit to discuss Christian ideas proved more important. When the "language of the gods" was Christianized, a vigorous interreligious exchange occurred, bringing to faith some of Indian Christianity's most original theological thinkers.

## NEHEMIAH GOREH (1825-1895)

"To eat and drink with the Christians!" a Hindu editorialist thundered. A young Brahman named Nilakantha Goreh, though learned in the Sanskrit wisdom of Indian antiquity, had just apostatized. Rumor had been rampant that devilry was afoot, inflamed by the disappearance of the allegedly hapless youth. Missionaries had had him whisked off to a faraway church, concerned that riots might erupt if their new Christian convert were to surrender his shoulder cord (emblematic of the "twice born") and be baptized in Varanasi, the sacred but volatile temple-city on the Ganges.

The year (1848) may have been long ago, but nowadays, too, Brahman conversions occur infrequently and always arouse consternation. Though the roles are only partly analogous, among Christians the apostasy of a pastor might seem comparable. Still, the social death a Brahman convert suffers makes all analogies farfetched. Individuals of such exalted status find the possibility of a new life, grounded in a different reality, difficult to envision. In converting to Christianity, they forfeit a status like unto that of "gods on earth" and a cornucopia of this-worldly and other-worldly prerogatives.

In the Hindu view, one is what one ingests. One preroga-

tive forbidden to Brahmins is, accordingly, the consumption of polluting "impurities" such as meat and alcohol, or anything from the hand of an "untouchable." Since Christians partake of both, the irate editorialist argued in 1848, they must have enticed their young victim, or he had succumbed in "a fit of insanity" to the blandishments of Europeans. From today's perspective, this echoes a familiar refrain: the charge that a convert's change of identity lacks integrity, both moral and intellectual.

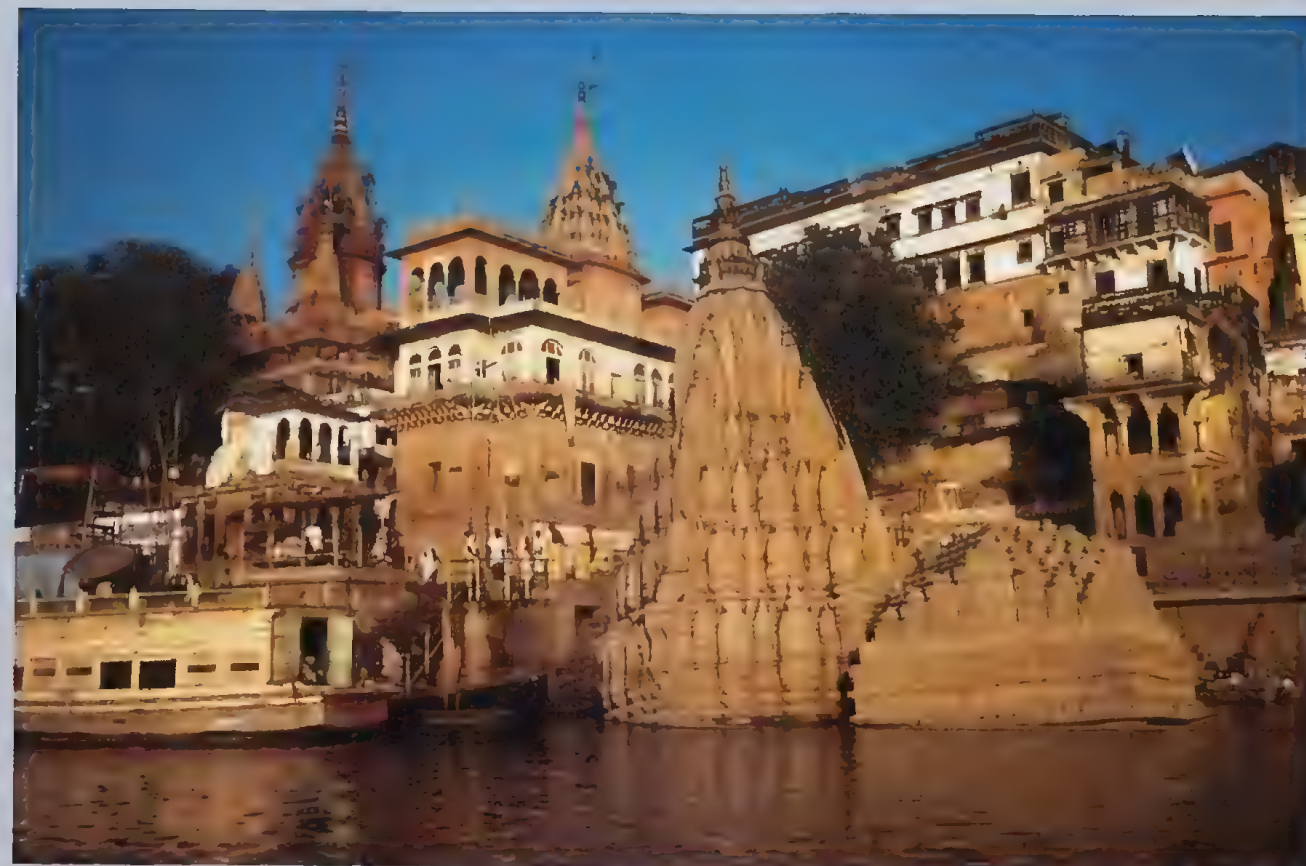
Back in Varanasi, Nehemiah (the Christian name of the baptized Nilakantha) found himself socially dead at 23 but spiritually transformed—and in most ways still culturally Hindu. "Becoming a Christian does not consist in eating and drinking," he answered his editorial critic, "but in worshiping the only God in spirit and humility." And to the accusation that missionaries had induced his apostasy, he gave a denial that sounds almost too insouciant, given the public drubbing he endured: "If my conversion was insane, blessed be insanity."

Like all conversions, Goreh's was an ongoing process. He certainly vacillated before his conversion and had continuing doubts afterwards. Still, as an intellectually gifted individual who had been trained in Varanasi's hallowed centers of Hindu learning, Goreh came to faith in a distinctly cognitive way. When Christianity first emerged on the horizon of his awareness, he marshaled his considerable erudition in a campaign to demolish its credibility and defend Vedanta. Goreh the saboteur, however, became Goreh the seeker, for reasons of the heart, about which we know little, and of the mind, about which we know much. But of beef and brandy there were none. As a young convert and later as an ordained Anglican priest, he maintained an ascetic lifestyle more in keeping with Hindu norms than with those of the more affluent European clergy.

The true testament to the intellectual integrity of Goreh's faith is found in his book entitled (in translation) *Rational Refutation of Hindu Philosophy*. Before his conversion, Goreh had argued that only the Veda reveals Brahman, the ground of all being. As a Christian, Goreh argued that God can be



Richard Fox Young



**CITY OF LIGHT AND LEARNING.** Varanasi, a major center of Hindu scholarship, is one of the oldest living cities in the world and a sacred city in India. Pilgrims come from all over the world to visit Varanasi's temples and to purify themselves in the Ganges River.

known only through the Bible. His belief in the necessity of revelation through sacred scriptures did not change, but after his conversion he flatly denied any rapport between Vedanta and Christianity. Instead, he rejected Vedanta's monism (the belief in one impersonal unifying principle in the universe) and replaced it with a Christ-centered theism.

Goreh's uncompromising position contrasted sharply with other Brahman converts such as Krishna Mohun Banerjea, an eminent Anglican cleric who believed that Christ had been prefigured in the Veda and that Christianity was Hinduism's true trajectory. Still, if Goreh's legacy is that of restoring otherness to both religions, one can acknowledge that as a form of severe but honest respect. For today's interreligious exchange, that's a constructive start.

## NARAYAN VAMAN TILAK (1861-1919)

For all their Sanskrit erudition, neither Goreh nor Banerjea—both of them Prayer Book Anglicans—did much of lasting value to imbue Christianity with an authentically Indian character. Thanks, however, to another Brahman Christian, Narayan Vaman Tilak, Marathi-speaking Christians in the western state of Maharashtra worship in a vernacular as natural as that of the

poet-saints whom Tilak loved before Christ became his guru—the guru whose Sermon on the Mount had brought him to his knees in thankful adoration:

"You are my thought, my speech, my knowledge, enjoyment, salvation; henceforth.

"Now no longer does any difference exist between us; even if there is any, it is only superficial; henceforth."

The oneness between the human and the divine to which Tilak alludes is not metaphysical (as in the Vedas) but spiritual and has true Christian integrity. Maratha Christians testify to Tilak's poetic ability to integrate Christian and pre-Christian spirituality in ways that both affirm and transform his Hindu heritage. Still, to discover his real voice and to put a recognizably Indian face on Christianity, Tilak felt compelled to reject the worship forms in the American mission churches that he loyally served while seeking to change them from the inside. In a famously subversive poem of protest, he complained that in those churches "we dance as puppets, while [missionaries] hold the strings." In Tilak's heart, only Christ could strike the right chords.

—Richard Fox Young is associate professor of the history of religions at Princeton Theological Seminary.



Varanasi: Photos.com; Tilak: Richard Fox Young



## BRAHMABANDHAV UPADHYAY (1861-1907)

### Christian theology on Indian foundations

**B**rahmabandhav Upadhyay was born Bhavani Charan Banerjee in 1867. A Bengali Brahman, he became a teacher in the Brahmo Samaj, a Hindu reform movement founded by Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833). However, he became increasingly attracted to the uniqueness of Christ, and on February 26, 1891, he received Christian baptism. Although he began as an Anglican, he united with the Catholic Church on September 1. Three years later, he declared himself a *sannyasin* (world-renouncer) and thereafter was



**BEING CHRISTIAN THE HINDU WAY.** Upadhyay believed Hindu philosophy could undergird, not undercut, Christian theology. Many Christians have appropriated Hindu institutions like the *ashram* (retreat center) above, where a Christian prepares to lead a worship service with hymnbooks scattered round.

known as Brahmabandhav ("lover of God") Upadhyay ("teacher"). His conversion to Christianity marked the beginning of a series of journalistic efforts by which Upadhyay sought to demonstrate how Christian theology was compatible with indigenous thought in India.

Upadhyay was dismayed at the inability of Christianity to flourish in India, especially among Brahmans. He once described Indian Christianity as "standing in the corner, like an exotic stunted plant with poor foliage, showing little or no promise of blossom." He decided to dedicate his life to discovering authentic, Indian expressions of Christianity that were not Western.

Over the course of his life, he made three major attempts to discover an appropriate foundation upon which to construct a Christian proclamation. The first foundation was natural theology, which was based on general revelation and the knowledge of God present in all people. However, he found this foundation deficient and re-examined the possibility of using the Sanskrit language and thought-forms of Brahmanical Hindu philosophy as a more appropriate

foundation for establishing Christian thought in India.

Upadhyay observed how Thomas Aquinas had boldly adopted the Aristotelian system of philosophy and effectively used it as the basis for constructing a Christian theology and philosophy. Why, he reasoned, "should we Catholics of India now wage a destructive warfare with Hindu philosophy?" Alternatively, he argued, we should "look upon it in the same way as St. Thomas looked upon the Aristotelian system." He then declared, "We are of the

opinion that attempts should be made to win over Hindu philosophy to the service of Christianity just as Greek philosophy was won over in the Middle Ages ... The Catholic Church will find it hard to conquer India unless she makes Hindu philosophy hew wood and draw water for her."

Upadhyay was convinced that the 8th-century Hindu philosopher Sankara could serve Christianity in India the way Aristotle had served Aquinas. This project consumed much of Upadhyay's writing during the next four years. Because he was the earliest to engage in this level of pioneering theological work, and particularly because of his insightful writings on the Trinity, Upadhyay has been called the "father of Indian Christian theology."

While Upadhyay never abandoned his desire to establish a philosophical foundation for Christianity in India, he gradually came to realize that many people in India devoted to popular, village religion simply did not respond to the sublime philosophy of high-caste Brahmans, such as Sankara. Thus, in his later years he attempted to find ways to build

Christianity on a third foundation: Indian culture. Upadhyay sought to promote a Christian transformation of such common cultural practices in India as the caste system and idol worship. For example, he argued that if idols were totally rejected it would unwittingly convey that Christians were at war with Indian culture. However, he hoped that idols could be transformed into non-religious symbols of national ideals. Indeed, it was his attempt to affirm the value of India's cultural heritage that eventually made him a leader within the nationalist movement. He has the distinction of being the first Indian to publicly call for complete independence (not just home-rule) from Britain.

Despite his untimely death from a tetanus infection in 1907, Upadhyay left behind a remarkable collection of journalistic writings that continue to influence today's discussion about how the Christian gospel can best be articulated in the Indian context.

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Chad Bauman

# Wanderer for Christ

Combining the lifestyle of an ascetic "holy man" with the devotion of a Christian visionary, Sadhu Sundar Singh became for many a symbol of authentically Indian Christianity.

TIMOTHY DOBE

**D**uring his 1920 tour of Europe, the Indian convert to Christianity Sundar Singh (1889-1929?) was proclaimed a living "Apostle and a Saint." As one Oxford scholar put it, "we feel from knowing him, we understand [St. Francis and St. Paul] better."

Such praise and adulation, however, were only faint echoes of the devotion Sundar Singh had inspired in India, where he had wandered robed in the style of a *sadhu* (ascetic "holy man") preaching Christ for 15 years. His Indian admirers proclaimed "How like Christ he is!" wherever he went. This likeness, they asserted, reflected a deep, mystical union: "It is no sin to call Sundar Singh 'Swami' [i.e., Lord] for Christ himself dwells in him."

What was it about Sundar Singh that inspired many Indian and European Christians? Like Paul, he claimed that his conversion came through a vision of Christ and that he traveled to the "third heaven" in ecstasy. Like Francis, he imitated Christ's life of poverty, wandering, and preaching. And like Christ himself, he taught in parables and suffered persecution.

Yet in the Indian context that shaped Sundar Singh's Christianity, all

**THE CHRISTIAN SADHU.** A Sikh-Christian convert whose vision of Christ changed his life, Sundar Singh never equated Christian faith with Western culture. He explained, "Indians need the Water of Life, but not the European cup."

these aspects of exemplary Christian religious life had strong parallels in Indian traditions. The *sadhu* or "holy man" renounces worldly life in seeking ultimate "salvation." In this way, Sundar Singh sought to demonstrate that Christian faith and Indian religious culture had much more in common than the Christianity brought by foreign missionaries seemed to allow. Indian Christians understood and appreciated this, and by the 1920s, many European Christians began to agree.

### Seeking the hidden God

One of Sundar Singh's parables about longing for God, reminiscent of Christ's teaching, is characteristic of him:

"A woman hid herself behind some thick trees in her garden and her little son came out in search of her, crying as he walked. He searched the whole garden but found no clue of her anywhere. The servant said to him: 'O son, why are you crying? Quit pursuing your mother! See how sweet are the mangos of this tree . . . I'll pick some and bring them right now.'

"The child said, 'No, no. I want my mother. My beloved mother is sweeter than those mangos by far . . . Actually this garden and all its fruits and flowers are mine, since whatever belongs to my mother also belongs to me. I want only my mother.' The mother who was sitting in the bushes and listening to all this immediately got up and grasped her child to her breast and began to kiss him. That garden became a paradise for the boy."

Sundar Singh was 15 years old when he decided that the garden of the world, though filled with beautiful things, was not enough to satisfy him. In the absence of God, the garden itself lost its appeal. His growing spiritual longing, unsatis-

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**THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED.** Sundar Singh refused to let the distractions of the world turn him from his devotion to Christ. He chose the disciplined life of a mendicant preacher, living in caves and jungles and devoting himself to the remote hill peoples.

fied by his study of Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, and Christian scriptures, had left him no choice—either he would obtain the vision (*darsan*) of God or continue to search in the next life. As he prepared to commit suicide one night in December 1904, Sundar Singh received a vision of Christ, who revealed his crucified love to the young Sikh.

This revelation brought him peace. It also provoked conflict. His father, a respected landholder in a rural village of Punjab, was not willing for the family to suffer the political and social humiliation of his son's conversion to a "foreign" religion that predominantly attracted "untouchable" castes. As soon as Sundar Singh made his determination clear by cutting his hair (uncut hair was one of five symbols of Sikh identity), he was expelled from his home.

#### The life of a *sadhu*

His devout mother, before her death, had been a model of spirituality to her son and had instilled in him the desire to emulate the mendicant ascetics (*sadhus*) whom she venerated. His vision of Christ and his expulsion from home provided the opportunity to pursue this path. After he was baptized, he gave away his few possessions and began to wander, accepting offerings of food as he went from village to village, meditating on, preaching, and singing the news of God's incarnation (*avatara*) in Christ.

Though the largely Presbyterian missionary community of Punjab had long been opposed to this kind of "syncretism," the blending of asceticism with devotion to Christ made sense to Sundar Singh. If the world was like a garden in which God was hidden, it was best not to be distracted by worldly pleasures, however good and sweet. In long hours of meditation, prayer and fasting, he found the vivid pres-

ence of Christ much sweeter than any other experience.

In hundreds of villages where he preached, this connection between local religious traditions and the Christian gospel made a crucial difference to his audience. In one instance, nine Hindu listeners, now ready for baptism after seeing and hearing him, stood and proclaimed, "We knew all about Christ for the last 20 years from the European missionaries; but now we understand truly that He is the only Savior."

#### A living example

Sundar Singh was not the first convert to combine Indian asceticism and Christian devotion, or to have visions. His fame in the 1920s might never have extended beyond the villages of North India. After his first decade of wandering (ca. 1905-1915), he remained nearly as obscure as Christian *sadhus* who had preceded him. But times were changing. Some liberal mis-

sionaries were embracing "fulfillment theory." Proponents of this view, as expressed in J. N. Farquhar's *The Crown of Hinduism* (1913), argued that non-Christian religions were a *praeparatio evangelica* and hailed Sundar Singh as a living example of the fulfillment of Hinduism in Christ. Consequently, as English-language publications about him were produced, he was invited on a series of wide-ranging tours, both in India and abroad. The Christian West was in need, not only of a new "St. Paul," but also of a hero similar to self-consciously "Hindu" *mahatmas* or "saints" such as Gandhi.

Once invited abroad, however, Sundar Singh's message was disarmingly simple. It focused not on theological assessments of "other" religions, missionary strategy, or Indian nationalism, but on the universal human need to seek God, and on God's revelation in Christ. The one thing necessary for those in both East and West was to sit in silence at the feet of the Divine Master, who was equally hidden and equally accessible to all.

In 1922, Sadhu Sundar Singh made his final return to India. As the onset of illness restricted his movement, he lived less and less in the garden of this world and more and more in the heavenly paradise (*bihist*) of his ecstatic visions. He composed eight devotional books and, when strength permitted, made intermittent returns to the lifestyle of a *sadhu*. In June of 1929, despite extremely poor health, Sundar Singh set out for Tibet. He never returned. And thus he disappeared, as historian Eric Sharpe put it, "into the brilliant darkness of legend."

CH&B

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# Hope for Outcastes

For India's "untouchable" Christians, relating their faith to the surrounding culture was no simple matter.

SUSAN BILLINGTON HARPER



As Christianity's demographic center of gravity shifts from the West to Asia and Africa, Third World Christians increasingly regard the secular West as a field for mission and ministry. A Nigerian nun passes out evangelistic literature in Harvard Square. An Indian (Telugu) Methodist minister delivers the opening benediction at a Fourth of July parade in Rosemont, Pennsylvania, a typical American suburb. London's largest church, Kingsway United Christian Center, is mainly Nigerian rather than British. Third World Christians are having a significant, although still insufficiently understood, impact on the West. As various Third World cultures and religious practices meet and interact over time within different strata of Western culture, history predicts that the outcome will be determined as much by indigenous as by imported cultural and religious preferences.

As we have seen in previous articles, the history of Christianity in India was not a simple tale of one-way Western

**THE LIBERATING POWER OF THE GOSPEL.** Jesus' accepting water from the Samaritan woman is a deeply significant story for the marginalized in India. Outcastes would never be asked for water by people of higher castes.

impact upon a heathen culture. Instead, Indian Christians were highly selective in what they chose to adopt from American and European missionaries. They were also discriminating in choosing which cultural elements to retain from their pre-Christian heritage, much to the dismay of many Western missionaries who were promoting greater "indigenization." The resulting Indian Christian cultural and religious idioms emerged not only from interactions between missionaries and Indian converts, but also between Indian castes (*jatis*), language/regional groups, and non-Christian religions. Indian Christianity is now as complex as the subcontinent into which this already varied and multi-denominational religion was introduced.



Roughly 80 percent of all Indian Christians hailed not from the upper castes of Pandita Ramabai, Nehemiah Goreh, and N. V. Tilak, but from the so-called "depressed" classes—the untouchables or outcastes. The life and ministry of South Asia's great Christian leader, Bishop Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah (1874-1945), illustrates the complex issues surrounding Indian converts' relation to their indigenous Hindu-Muslim culture. His father was a convert from the semi-untouchable Shanar caste, whose turn to Christianity was part of the caste's broader upward mobilization into the now influential modern Nadar caste. Attracted by Christianity's commitment to transcending caste prejudices and divisions, Azariah created India's first indigenous missionary societies in 1903 and 1905 and served as the first Indian bishop of the Anglican Church from 1912 until his death on the eve of Indian Independence. His life and ministry provide a window on the ambivalence outcaste Christians felt toward indigenization within local cultural systems that had oppressed them but from which they still desired respect and acceptance.

Azariah left his Tamil roots in 1909 to go as a missionary to Telugu-speaking regions of the Nizam's Dominions and the Madras Presidency, where he subsequently led some of 20th-century India's most successful depressed class and non-Brahman conversion movements to Christianity. The total Anglican Christian population in his Telugu-speaking Dornakal Diocese increased from 56,681 in 1912 to 225,080 in 1941, a number that exceeded the total number of Anglican converts for all of Japan, Korea, and China combined. In 1936, the Dornakal church baptized 11,400 new converts, at an average rate of over 200 per week.

This successful public ministry took place in the midst of rising Indian nationalism and an increasingly powerful Independence movement, which put pressure on the Indian Christian community to prove its indigenous character. Mohandas K. Gandhi's *swadeshi* campaign for Indian economic self-reliance and his galvanizing calls for *swaraj*, or Indian Home Rule, influenced educated Indian Christian elites and progressive Western missionaries to accelerate a centuries-old campaign for church self-sufficiency brought to India by pietist Lutherans such as C. F. Schwartz and Anglo-American missionary statesmen Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson.

Most Indian Christians, however, rejected the anti-British and anti-foreign aspects of nationalism and, where they desired church self-sufficiency and indigenization, they often realized it in wholly unexpected, uniquely local and, sometimes surprisingly Western ways.



Bishop V. S. Azariah

#### Turban or no turban?

The great bishop and scholar Stephen Neill wrote, "It has always amused me that, whereas I the foreigner always went to Church barefoot, Azariah, the Indian, always wore leather shoes." The British bishop had adopted the Indian custom, while the Indian bishop had adopted the Western custom. Such reversals were not too uncommon by the end of the British period. Dornakal Christians chose a Westerner, rather than an Indian, to succeed Azariah as Bishop of Dornakal, a move that greatly disappointed Western missionary indigenizers but satisfied local Christians eager for a mediator between rival Mala and Madiga caste groups.

There was no simple way to indigenize within India's complex society. Converts from across the subcontinent came from very different "Indias" and, additionally, these different "Indias" were in a constant process of change and redefinition. Azariah's Tamil Nadar India was quite different from his Dornakal church's Telugu Mala/Madiga India, and these Indias were, in turn, different from a multitude of others. The Madiga converts of his diocese were traditionally leather workers occupied in the tanning of skins and the making of leather articles. They had occupied the lowest status in society, and because their touch was considered to be polluting, they were prohibited from drawing water from common wells and from living in the main village.

These Madiga village converts wished to leave this background behind through a change of religious identity, through education, and through new occupations. If indigenization and self-sufficiency implied the continuation of symbols and practices associated with the stigma and shame of their former social status, they were generally not interested. The Telugu church has developed a beautiful indigenous musical tradition, but its incorporation of local traditions into Christian worship and life has been highly selective.

Azariah was named after the virtuous Old Testament king of Judah whose leprosy caused him to live apart from others (2 Kings 15:1-5), and the social stigmas associated with his own former caste identity were never far from his mind. Azariah politely resisted pressure from his mentor's wife, Isabel Whitehead, to add a turban to his Episcopal attire when he was consecrated in 1912. To her, the turban was the consummate symbol of the dignified Orient and, hence, perfect garb for the first Indian bishop. To Azariah, it was an embarrassing reminder of either the rustic cloths that coolie workers wrapped around their heads for protection from the sun, or the more extravagant headgear of India's



**REACHING TOWARD HEAVEN.** LEFT: The steeple of this church in Megnanapuram towers above every Hindu temple or mosque for miles around. For poor Christians, building tall churches was a symbolic way of rising above their status in society, and neighboring villages of refuge even vied with other to see who could build the highest steeple. RIGHT: A low-caste woman.



principely, martial, or elitist Brahman-dominated traditional culture. Worse, the turban seemed old-fashioned to his generation, which now favored a more modern round cap.

In the end, Azariah chose a simple Western cassock without the turban. It was surely surprising and probably frustrating to Western orientalist indigenizers to discover that Indian Christians had their own ideas about how to define their new identity, and that sometimes these indigenous solutions borrowed freely from Western idioms.

#### Pukka churches

In India, Christianity entered a highly fluid society, where boundaries and relations between different caste groups were routinely being challenged and redefined. Christianity played an essential role in the upward mobility of Azariah's own previously semi-untouchable Shanar (later Nadar) caste as the missionaries and newly educated converts protected these people from persecution by Vellalar (high-caste) landlords eager to preserve a cheap and docile workforce. Christians defended Shanar women during the violent "breast-cloth controversy" in which Shanars challenged upper-caste requirements that Shanar women go unclothed above the waist. Christian schools provided access to better jobs, greater mobility, economic improvement, and higher social status.

When Tirunelveli Christians such as Azariah's father chose to build semi-gothic churches with towering steeples, they were turning their backs on the small, usually thatched shrines of their former faith, which were so representative of their poverty and social marginalization. The new Christian

edifices were *pukka* (or proper) churches made of substantial stone (including stones from former shrines) and built deliberately on the sites of former shrines to symbolize their replacement. Converts took particular pleasure in building new church steeples higher than local Hindu temples. When Azariah himself later built a *pukka* cathedral in Indo-Saracenic style in Dornakal, one sees the emergence of an even more self-confident indigenous church willing to borrow freely from idioms of elite Hindu and Muslim architecture.

Sometimes new Christians from untouchable backgrounds adopted upper-caste non-Christian practices as part of their efforts to raise their social status. In Dornakal, many converts stopped eating beef, pork, and other meats considered by higher castes to be "polluted," even though the Anglican church had no policy on the subject of eating these meats and its leaders were almost all meat eaters. (Indeed, some neighboring Baptist missionaries advocated eating beef as a test for converts to demonstrate the Christian's freedom from Hindu reverence for the cow.) Yet, Azariah wrote, "I was very much amused at this anti-beef campaign by our Christians. That it should have started from them entirely and that, too, solely for the sake of removing the prejudice of the caste people against the Christian faith are most encouraging facts."

The grassroots anti-beef-eating campaign complemented the Dornakal church's teaching against alcoholism and other immoralities to challenge local forms of depressed class oppression. Visiting a village in 1936 whose Christians had been baptized eleven years before, Azariah discovered that



their commitment to giving up "drink, beef, theft and lies" had so improved their "cleanliness" in the eyes of village landlords (*zamindars*) that distance requirements of their former untouchability had been abandoned. Abstention from defiling meats was a purely indigenous means by which formerly outcaste Christians succeeded in raising their social status. Non-Christian villagers often joined the Christian anti-beef campaigns, but the church was clearly the driving force in this larger process of Telugu caste mobility.

#### A church embracing all

The Indian Anglicanism that emerged in Dornakal and elsewhere in the subcontinent provided a powerful means by which subordinate groups elevated their rank in the local social hierarchy by accommodating to and sometimes transforming the values of dominant, non-Christian groups. Us-

ing indigenous idioms, the church challenged local orders of rank and precedence with varying degrees of success.

The Indian church today is still plagued by group divisiveness related to remnants of caste/*jati* prejudices and loyalties. However, the Christian message continues to impact the subcontinent in new and dynamic ways, challenging past practices and creating new models of human brotherhood. As Azariah reminded his diocese: "The religion of Christ . . . refuses to be confined to any one race, class, or caste. It seeks to embrace all. It is most true to itself when it refuses to be restricted by human fear or prejudice; if it ever becomes petrified and static, it is dead!" **CH&B**

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## CONVERSION AND NATIONALISM: THEN AND NOW

Conversions to Christianity in India have always been controversial, provoking protests and persecutions in their wake. Azariah frequently reminded his contemporaries that, when their depressed class forefathers converted, "their landlords and their masters placed every obstacle imaginable on their path. They were often deprived of their homes, their property, yet sometimes their own lives [were] threatened." Western and indigenous missionaries alike habitually faced serious obstacles to their work on the subcontinent.

Fresh controversies over conversion erupted in the 1930s, however, as British political reforms granted greater political power to Indians along religious lines. Christians, like Muslims and other religious minorities, were granted "separate electorates," so that political participation was determined by religious affiliation and conversion therefore impacted electoral roles as much as church roles. Mass conversion movements of depressed class groups, which were occurring in Bishop Azariah's Dornakal Diocese and elsewhere, now directly threatened Mohandas K. Gandhi's "Children of God" bid to secure the allegiance of the untouchables within the political fold of his charismatically Hindu form of messianic nationalism.

Gandhi sharpened his criticisms of Bishop Azariah and other missionaries in the mid 1930s, accusing them of using unfair methods and exaggerated claims about depressed class conversions. There were rumors that, in a private meeting with Azariah in 1937, Gandhi threatened to legislate against conversion in an independent India and to back up such legislation with state force. Such rumors further increased Indian Christian fears of the future. Toward the end of his life, Azariah predicted that the Indian church was entering a new period of difficulty.

Since the coming of Independence, Christian missionary activ-



**MILITANT HINDUS.** Anti-Christian nationalist party Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (R.S.S.) sponsors training camps for activists.

ity has, indeed, come under severe attack. The Niyogi Report of the State of Madhya Pradesh, published in 1956, recommended the passage of anti-conversion laws. So-called Freedom of Religion Acts of the 1960s further bolstered Hindu efforts to stop conversion. A Supreme Court ruling on January 17, 1977, defined the evangelist's work as a threat to the "freedom of conscience" guaranteed to all citizens of India. The successful challenge of the Hindu Nationalist BJP party to Congress Party political dominance at the end of the 20th century, accompanied by growing anti-Christian propaganda of the R.S.S. and Sangh Parivar, have all placed Indian Christians in an increasingly awkward position in their homeland.

Azariah would have been saddened but not surprised to witness, for example, the passing in 2002 of the BJP-inspired "Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion Ordinance." He would not have been surprised, either, to hear the bill's Hindu supporters invoke Gandhi's anti-conversion rhetoric in its defense. Azariah had warned against a time when "nationalism is apt to be identified with loyalty to the ancient religion of the land; and this identification might easily look with suspicion and disfavor on any religion which is not supposed to belong to the soil, and which, in addition, is pledged to propagate itself among all outside it."

Such a danger has not passed in India, although it is mitigated by the many counterbalancing forces of what Azariah called India's "genius for toleration, accommodation, and sufferance." That Indian Christians of the future, even in Christian strongholds such as Tamil Nadu, might be threatened not only by what Azariah termed "subtle oppression and intolerant interference" but also by more serious hostility and persecution is not an impossibility.

—Susan Billington Harper



## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

While no comprehensive history of Christianity in India has yet been produced, the Church History Association of India (CHAI), located in Bangalore, has produced several excellent volumes. Of note: *History of Christianity in India, Volume I: From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century* (1982) and *Sixteenth century traditions of St. Thomas Christians* (1970), both by Mathias Mundadan, one of India's most distinguished church historians; *History of Christianity in India, Volume IV, Part 2: Tamilnadu in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, by Hugald Grafe (1990); and *History of Christianity in India, Vol. 5: North East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1992), both by Frederick S. Downs. CHAI also publishes the *Indian Church History Review*.

The best existing general study is Stephen Neill's masterful two-volume *History of Christianity in India* (Cambridge, 1984, 1985). Neill himself spent 20 years as a missionary in southern India, becoming bishop of Tirunelveli in Tamil Nadu, and few historians of Christian mission have as much stature as he does. Neill also wrote a shorter one-volume overview, *The Story of the Christian Church in India and Pakistan* (Eerdmans, 1970). Other general studies include *A History of Christianity in Asia*, by Samuel Hugh Moffatt (Orbis, 2005).

Robert Eric Frykenberg is currently engaged in writing the *Oxford History of Christianity in India*, which will attempt to tell the whole story from an Indo-centric perspective, with special emphasis upon Christian peoples within Hindu and Muslim contexts, rather than ecclesiastical structures. In the meantime, if this issue piques your interest in Indian Christianity but you're not sure you want to dive into a book on the subject, check out Frykenberg's chapter on India in Adrian Hastings's *A World History of Christianity* (Eerdmans, 1999). In less than 50 pages, Frykenberg introduces the traditions surrounding the Apostle Thomas, then traces the development of Thomas, Catholic, and evangelical Christianity down to the present time. Another brief survey is Kenneth and Helen Ballhatchet's entry on "Asia" in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, edited by John McManners (1990).

Several volumes in the Studies in the History of Christian Missions series published by Eerdmans focus specifically on Indian Christianity: *Protestant Origins in India: Tamil Evangelical Christianity, 1706-1835*, by D. Dennis Hudson (2000); *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V. S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India*, by Susan Billington Harper (2000); *Christians, Cultural Interactions, and India's Re-*

*ligious Traditions*, edited by Judith Brown and Robert Eric Frykenberg (2002), and *Christians and Missionaries in India*, edited by Frykenberg (2003).

Here are some more titles for further study.

**Ancient Christianity in India:** *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, by Leslie W. Brown (Cambridge, 1956; reprint 1982).

**Ziegenbalg and the Tranquebar Mission:** *It Began in Tranquebar*, by E. Arno Lehmann (CLS, 1956); and *The First Protestant Missionary to India: Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg, 1683-1719*, by Brijraj Singh (Oxford, 1999).

**Catholicism:** *A history of Christianity in India, from early times to St. Francis Xavier: A.D. 521-542*, by George Mark Moraes (Bombay: Manaktalas, 1964); *A Pearl to India: The Life of Roberto di Nobili*, by Vincent Cronin (Dutton, 1959); and *Catholic Revival in India in the 19th Century: Role of Mgr. Clement Bonnard (1796-1861)*, by Thomas Anchukandam (Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti, 1996).

**Pandita Ramabai:** *Pandita Ramabai's America*, edited by Robert Eric Frykenberg (Eerdmans, 2003); *Pandita Ramabai: Through Her Own Words*, by Meera Kosambi (Oxford, 2000); and *Pandita Ramabai Saraswati*, by Padmini Sengupta (Asia Publishing House, 1970).

**South India:** *Christians and Public Life in Colonial South India, 1863-1937*, by Chandra Mallampalli (Routledge/Curzon, 2004).

**Northeast India:** *The Growth of Baptist Churches in Nagaland*, Puthuvail Thomas Philip (CLC, 1976; 2nd ed. 1983). *The Mighty Works of God: A Brief History of the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India: The Mission Period, 1836 - 1950* (CLC, 1971) by Frederick S. Downs.

**Others:** *Resistant Hinduism: Sanskrit Sources on Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth Century India* (Vienna & Delhi, 1981) and *The Bible Trembled: The Hindu-Christian Controversies of Nineteenth Century Ceylon* (De Nobili Research Library Vienna, 1995) by Richard Fox Young; *A History of Dalit Christians in India*, by John C. B. Webster (Mellen, 1992); and *In Search of Identity: Debates on Religious Conversion India*, Sebastian C. H. Kim (Oxford, 2003).

Studying about another culture is one thing; going there and seeing it for yourself is quite another. If you're not up to the 20-hour trip to New Delhi, the next best option is Charlie Pye-Smith's travelogue, *Rebels and Outcasts: A Journey Through Christian India* (Viking, 1997). Weaving together historical background with first-hand descriptions of contemporary Christian communities, Pye-Smith's evocative account will bring the colors of India to your reading chair.

